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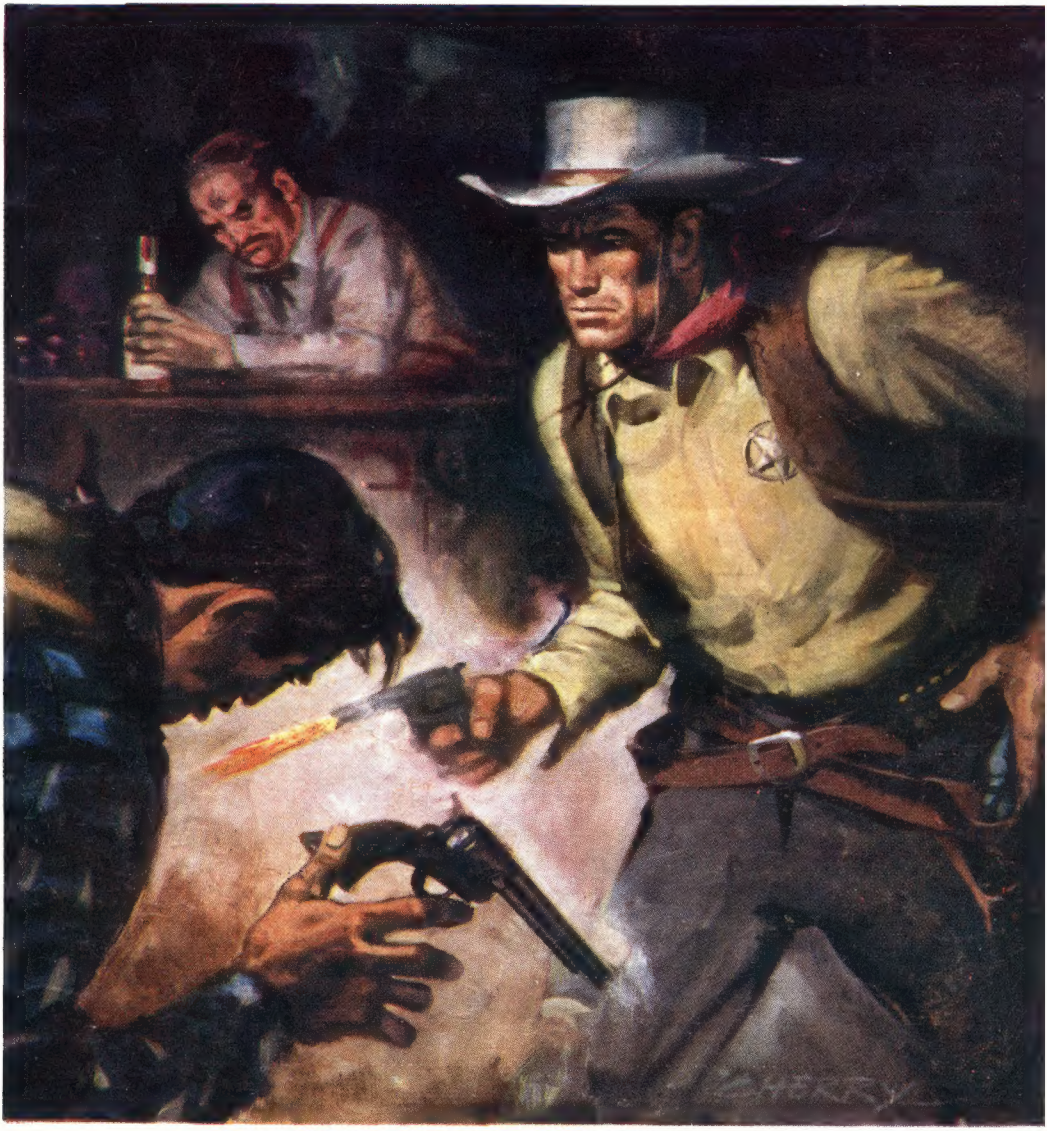

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A HARD-HITTING JIM HATFIELD NOVEL BY **JACKSON COLE**

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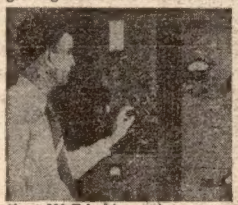

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EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 62, No. 2 APRIL, 1956

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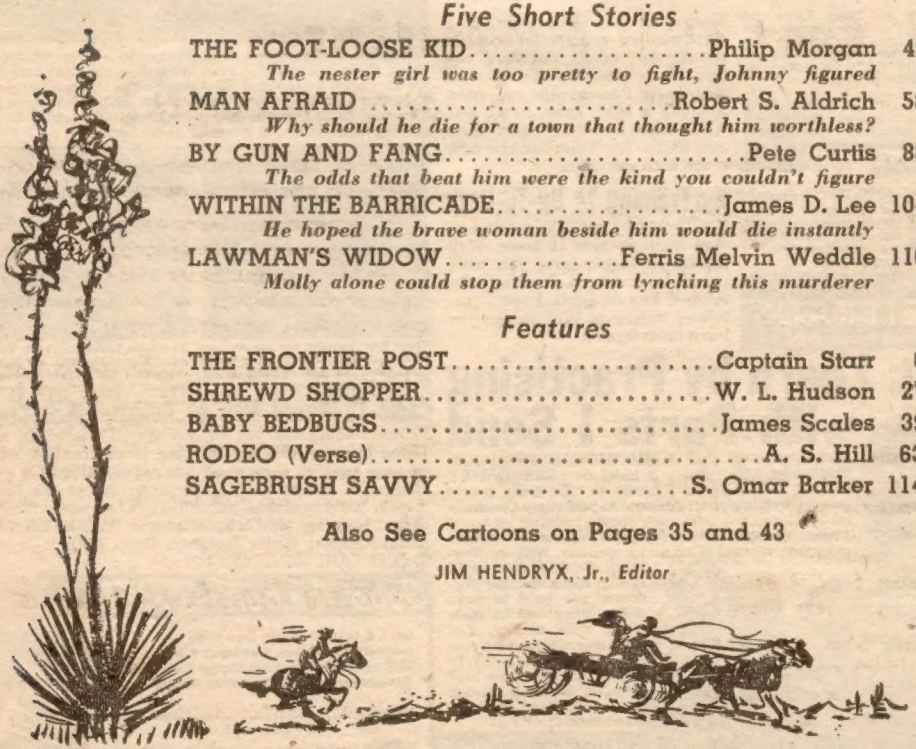
JIM HENDRYX, Jr., *Editor*



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The Doctor Who Went Bad

THE STAGE STOOD motionless at the mouth of a canyon. Lined up against its side were the passengers and the driver. Their trembling hands were raised high above their heads. Not far from the bright yellow front wheel of the stage lay the express box, open and empty. The loot was stuffed in the saddle bags of the four mounted men who sat with their guns trained on the huddled group.

The express messenger, shot through both arms, lay on the ground near the looted treasure box. Doctor Hodges was kneeling beside the wounded man, skillfully applying dressings. The doctor tied a final knot on the bandages and stood up. He glanced at the passengers and driver, then strode to his waiting mount—held by one of the holdup men.

Doctor Hodges, one-time surgeon, better known as Tom Bell, had successfully completed another stagecoach robbery.

When Tom Bell decided to change his profession, he did so with a vengeance. His organization was complete with initiation oaths, passwords, a spy system and a roadhouse run by women accomplices. But retribution was fast closing in on the erstwhile doctor. The year was 1856, and Tom Bell was only a few weeks away from the place that rhymed with his name.

Bell and his gang were enjoying a period of pronounced success, until the day came when one of the spies rode in with the news that was to bring about their downfall. The spy had discovered that the Marysville stage would be carrying almost a million dollars in gold on its next trip.

The bandit-doctor made his plans quickly and effectually. Seven of them, counting Bell, would take part in the attack on the stage. One man would go for the lead horses. Each side of the stage would be covered by three men. Coupled with the advantage of surprise, the plan seemed to be foolproof.

When the Marysville stage started out for Sacramento that day, John Gear was driving. Beside him sat Bill Dobson, the express messenger, armed with two shotguns and a pair of revolvers. There were nine passengers, including four Chinese and one negro woman.

One of the contingent, a gold dust buyer who owned a large part of the shipment in the treasure box, rode ahead of the stage. Three of the gang encountered this rider and stopped to disarm and dismount him. They were delayed by this meeting and thereby messed up Tom Bell's well-laid plans.

The rest of the gang attacked as scheduled. John Gear pulled up on the reins as he was ordered. The coach came to a halt. Dobson, however, was not intimidated. He opened fire with the shotgun. His first shot knocked Bell sprawling from his saddle. The other three members of the gang rode up as the four Chinese darted from the stage and disappeared.

Bell regained his mount, but the tide had turned against him. A barrage of shots came from the passengers inside the coach and from Bill Dobson up on the deck. John Gear was wounded, but he whipped the horses into action as the bandits fell back from the road.

When the embattled stage rolled into town, one passenger was found to be shot through both legs, another had a head wound. The negro woman was dead. A posse of enraged citizens was formed immediately. Within a few weeks the gang, not including Bell, was wiped out.

A short time later, Tom Bell was betrayed by the women in his crew. He was captured by a posse and hanged. Doctor Hodges had made his last change of professions.

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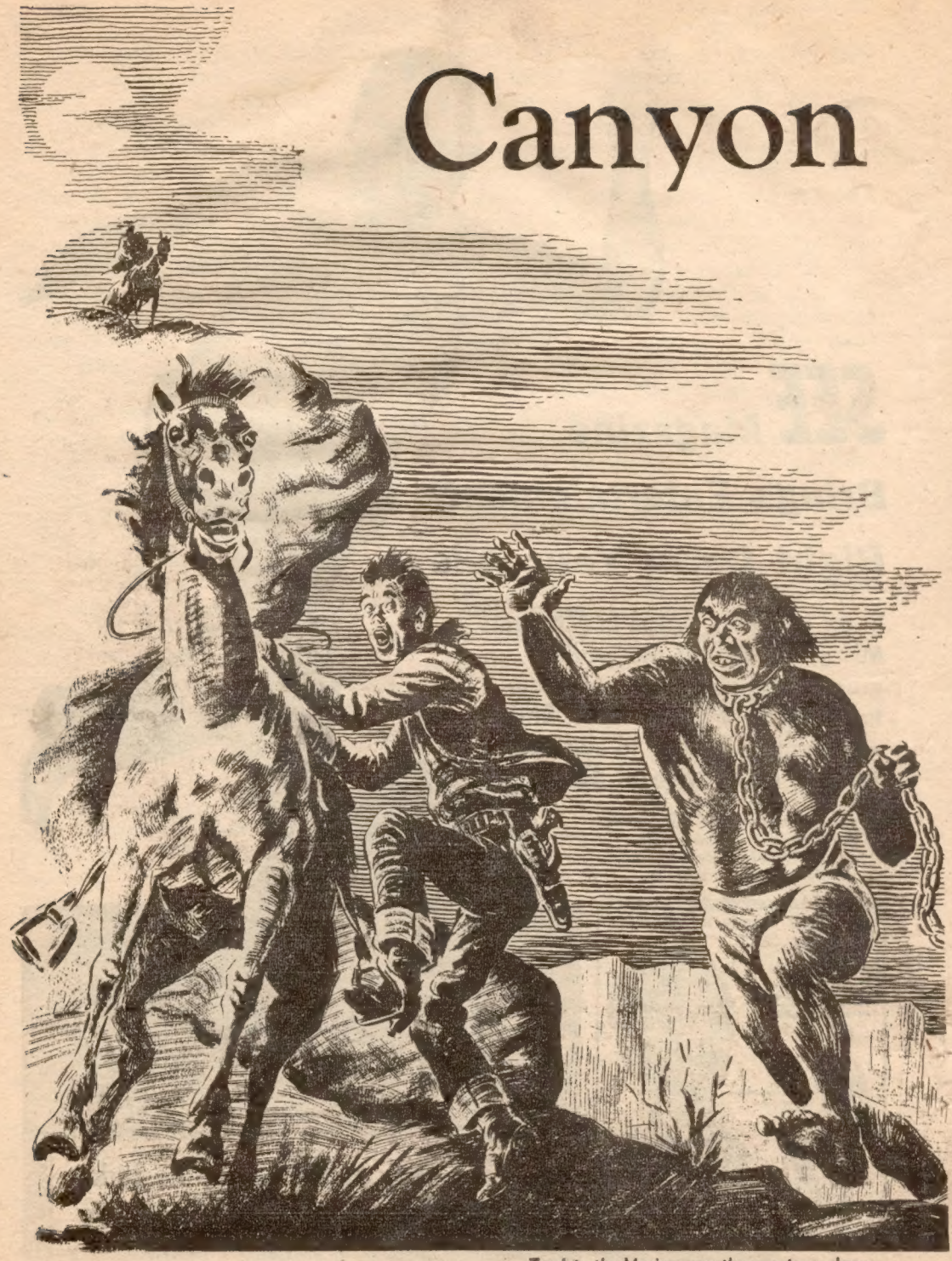


Too late the Mexican saw the monstrous shape

of the Lost

A Jim Hatfield Novel by **JACKSON COLE**

The Lone Wolf found only the broken body of the Ranger whom he was to have met in Gallejo—a body crushed by hands of incredible strength!

CHAPTER I

The Thing on the Ledge

RANGER ARCH DARREN heard the sound, a faint shuffling of heavy pads on the rocky ledge trail and the hackles rose on the back of his neck. His horse trembled violently between his legs. He swiveled in saddle, his eyes searching the night-darkened trail behind him. He licked dry lips.

Below him, sixty feet straight down, the black waters of the Davis River slid between the hemming cliffs.

The padding ceased. Arch felt his stomach muscles tighten; he fought the near panic fluttering inside him. There was nothing back there, he told himself. Nothing a .30-30 slug

that shuffled out of the shadows behind him

couldn't stop.

Overhead the blue-black sky seemed a high arch over the hemming river canyon walls. The high-riding moon was hidden behind a mushroom head of cloud. The cloud was moving. In a few moments a break would spill moonlight down over the trail.

Arch's mare whinnied uneasily. He leaned over and patted the side of her neck. "Easy, gal," he muttered. "Whatever it is, a slug will stop it."

He heard the scuffing again, like soft moccasins—or the pads of an animal—on bare rock. With it sounded a metallic clinking, like a chain being dragged over rock.

Sliding his Winchester from his saddle boot, Arch held it across his saddle. He should have waited for Ranger Jim Hatfield, back in Gallejo, he thought numbly. Such had been his orders. But he had chafed at the wait; he had wanted a look at Los Canyon before the arrival of the Ranger who was known throughout the West as the Lone Wolf. He had wanted to prove to Lupe, the Mexican dancer back in Gallejo, that he was not afraid of what was in Lost Canyon, whatever it was.

The mare he rode was getting hard to hold. Arch's jaw tightened. If she got out of control on this narrow ledge—

He heard the padding again, quite clear now in the deep stillness. It came from around the abutment fifty yards away. The clanking chain added an eerie note to the heavy scuffing footsteps.

The cocky glint was gone from Arch Darren's eyes now. His mouth felt as dry as dust. He would have given a year's pay to have the Lone Wolf at his side.

He tried to envisage what was coming around that bend. No animal would be clanking a chain! And yet that heavy scuffing could not me made by a man.

THE moon broke through in that moment, sending shafts of pale light down on the river-canyon trail.

Arch saw it then. One brief glimpse that froze the blood in his veins, brought a look of utter incredulity to his face. It *was* a man who came around the bend—but a man in some similarity to others only!

To the young Ranger it seemed as if he were looking at a breech-clouted monster at least nine feet tall! The massive, hairy body was topped by a relatively small flat head in which small piggish eyes glittered. A mop of lank coarse hair fell over his ears.

In his left hand the giant carried a length of iron chain. The chain was linked to a wide iron collar around his neck.

Arch Darren noticed this in that one instant of sharp moonlight. Then from somewhere behind the rock jut, in the darkness of the high cliff wall, a sharp trilling whistle pierced the stillness.

The cloud mass moved across the face of the moon again and the stubby mare under the wiry Ranger whistled with terror and tried to climb up the sheer rock wall of the canyon trail!

Arch Darren slammed a shot into the dark shuffling monster, frantically levered another shell into position and pulled trigger. He knew he had hit the thing the first time. He didn't have time to see the effects of his second shot. For a beamlike arm crashed down on his mare's neck like a pile-driver, bringing the animal to her knees. Then great hands closed around the rifle barrel, pulling it away from the Ranger as though the officer were a child. The barrel bent in a U between the monstrous hands, then the Winchester went spinning over the canyon edge into the river below.

Arch's right hand dragged at his Colt. His shot made its heavy racket through the canyon. But the shot went wild as those huge hands closed around his neck, wringing it as easily as though it were a a chicken's.

In the darkness Arch Darren's lifeless body was lifted high over the giant's head, whirled around and tossed far out over the ledge. The splash below was only faintly audible.

The mare lay on the trail, quivering, her neck broken. The giant stood over her, his breath whistling in the darkness. Blood from Darren's bullet high in the monster's

shoulder dripped to the rocky trail.

From around the bend came that trilling whistle—two short blasts. It was an imperious summons.

The great shambling figure turned and shuffled back as docilely as some huge dog obeying its master. The figure left a trail of blood.

The sun beat down over the manzanita-dotted flats under the *Los Perdidos Hills.* Gallejo lay in the shadow of these hills which, knowing no arbitrary boundary, continued into Mexico. A hot, desolate, mysterious land—a tangle of forgotten canyons, chasms, heights over which only the turkey buzzard soared in ceaseless quest.

It was a land where red chile hung in long banners from the adobe eaves, where goats eyed each rider with stupid belligerence, where brown, stolid-faced women still ground corn with stone pestles, and children, already brown, turned darker in the blaze of the sun.

A land of manana—and mystery. Of legends that reached back into yesterday; of stories of lost mines, of the cities of Cibola and of Eldorado.

Into this land of sun and heat and legend rode a big man on a great golden stallion. He was dressed as a range hand who had seen better days; but the two snugged-down Peacemakers on his thighs were expensive and well-kept.

Several trails led to Gallejo, one of them a well-traveled stage road. But this rider had his own reasons for following none of them. He was headed for Gallejo along the rather haphazard route taken by an old watercourse.

HE WAS a big man, browned and shaped by the weather, and the troubles encountered on a thousand trails. At this moment he rode slouched lazily in saddle, his hands cupped around the jew's harp in his mouth. The doleful notes of *A Cowboy's Lament* tinkled in the morning heat.

In front of the high-stepping sorrel a mottled gray-brown shape coiled and rattled its ominous warning!

The slouched rider's right hand dropped, blurred. There was a crash of sound, a roll of smoke, and the rattler twitched in headless blind instinct.

The big stallion stepped disdainfully

JIM HATFIELD

over the snake and continued on his way. The big rider lifted his empty hand to his mouth and, eyes half-closed, suffered on with the lamenting cowboy.

He presented a perfect picture of a drifting cowboy himself, what the old-timers called a Pecos cowboy. A tophand, perhaps, but a man who would never stay on a job long enough to save money or develop a stake in the spread for which he worked.

Which was exactly the impression Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger, wanted to give. Ranger Captain Bill McDowell's trusted lieutenant and top trouble-shooter, he was

better known as the Lone Wolf, a name given him by Captain Bill himself. In more than one desolate corner of the big sprawling state he was its only authority; his guns the only law!

He now was headed for Gallejo to meet Ranger Arch Darren in the Border Saloon. His orders were to work with young Darren on the disappearance of a nationally famous photographer, Henry Mayfield, who had been sent from Washington to do a series of photographic sketches of the disputed Los Perdidos Hills.

Captain McDowell's telegraphed message to Hatfield had been brief and characteristic:

> Strong reasons to believe Mayfield held prisoner of *El Halcon's* Border gang. Also, Washington hints opium smuggling real reason for Mayfield being dispatched to Los Perdidos Hills. It was hoped that Mayfield, as a photographer, would not be molested.
>
> Arch Darren will wait for you in Gallejo. He should be in town a week before you can get there. Hope he's not in trouble with some señorita when you find him.
>
> If you need help, look up Alan Kerstin, retired doctor. Lives just outside Gallejo. Putters around with old bones, Indian relics. Holds an honorary commission in the Rangers . . .

The Lone Wolf glanced up at the sun. He was to meet Arch just before sundown today. It was now close to noon.

Remembering the young Ranger, Hatfield's lips stretched in an easy grin. Arch was no green kid; he had hung around Ranger camps ever since the death of his folks, when he was fourteen. A likable cuss, but inclined to be cocky, reckless—and he had a weakness for a woman's smile.

"Hope Arch hasn't got himself hooked up with some gal in Gallejo, Goldy," Hatfield muttered.

The sorrel shook his head and snorted violently, showing what *he* thought of Arch Darren.

Ahead of them Gallejo began to merge from the shadow of the ochre butte which watched somberly over the ancient town. The gold cross atop the whitewashed adobe mission blazed in the mid-day sun.

It was a time when all sane Border inhabitants sought the coolness of darkened rooms, or dozed in the scant shade afforded by low eaves. It was no time for a woman to scream in shrill terror!

Jim Hatfield swiveled in saddle. Riding in the old watercourse, he was below the level of the surrounding country. A fringe of desert shrubbery, lining the bank, screened him from whoever had uttered that cry. But it had sounded close by.

He dropped the jew's harp into his pocket. His strange green eyes lost their easy good nature. "Let's take a look, Goldy."

CHAPTER II

"We'll Meet Again, Señor!"

THE LONE WOLF rode up the *barranca* and found himself facing the back of a flat-roofed adobe *jacal*. Manzanita dotted the sandy soil between him and the hut. Two staked goats eyed him with stubborn suspicion.

He heard a small boy's shrill voice rise on the heated air, protesting. Then a slap sounding flatly cut him off. A man's heavy gutturals followed.

Goldy stepped quietly along the side of the hut and then the big Ranger pulled him in, leaning forward to survey the scene taking place in the glare of the dusty yard.

Four mounted men, their backs to Hatfield, were watching a squat man standing by a small hog pen with a whip raised in his hand. One of the riders held a saddled animal, evidently the mount of the man with the whip.

At the squat man's feet a boy kneeling in the dust was holding a hand to his face.

A girl, her wrists tied to the top crossbar of the pen, was sobbing quietly. She had her back to the man with the whip and her flimsy cotton blouse was shredded, revealing two livid welts across her olive-skinned back.

In the doorway of the *jacal* a fat Mexican woman looked on with stolid helpless-

ness. She was holding two small, wide-eyed children.

The men directing the whipping was mounted on a white stallion. He was a lean, smooth-shaven Mexican with a dark, hawk-nosed face. His lips had a cruel, uncompromising bent. He had the air of a man who had seen so much cruelty that it no longer bothered him. Smoke from a thin cheroot curled up past his glittering eyes.

No one noticed the man on the golden stallion.

"Four more, José!" the leader said lazily. "Perhaps the bite of the lash will help Lupe to hold her tongue, eh!"

José grinned. He had a round oily face made villainous by a thick black mustache. His shoulder muscles knotted as he drew back to strike.

Three inches above his curled fingers the whip vanished as the heavy concussion of a .45 punched across the sun-beaten stillness.

The gunshot seemed to hang in the heated air, a grim and naked warning. Surprise held the riders motionless. José recovered first. He whirled, reached for his holster gun.

The next shot took the lobe of José's left ear. It changed José's intentions as abruptly as though he had run smack up against a granite wall. His hand reversed itself and went up to clutch at his bleeding ear.

The riders swiveled to face the shots. They saw a tall, broad-shouldered rider sitting lazily in the saddle of a magnificent sorrel horse. A man who looked like a saddle tramp, except that few such footless ones ever owned or rode an animal like that big golden stud.

Smoke still trickled from his Colt. Even as the men stared he slipped it back into his right-hand holster. His hands came to rest near his pommel.

"The day's yet young, gents," he drawled. His voice had a deceiving casualness, but the eyes that watched from beneath his cocked stetson had a grim and naked expectancy. "Which of you big brave *vaqueros* wish to continue with the day's festivities?"

There were four of them, not counting José who was still holding a hand to his ear—four hard-bitten riders all with their fingers itchy around their gun handles. The Lone Wolf's eyes challenged them individually, a curl of contempt on his lips.

His regard lingered longest on the rider at the far end of the small group—the man holding José's cayuse. Mexican, like his companions. Yet there was something markedly different about this man. A medium-sized man, compactly built, he had a reckless grin that went with his square, pug-nosed features. Blue eyes peered incongruously from beneath beetling black brows.

NO ONE made a motion to accept the Lone Wolf's invitation.

His voice lifted sharply. "You, José! Cut that girl free!"

José hesitated, his eyes on the rider on the white horse. The man nodded.

José drew his belt knife and cut the thongs holding the girl. She sagged limply against the pen as if to steady herself. Then she whirled, unmindful of the way her blouse hung in tatters from her naked shoulders. Her hands clawed at José's face. . . .

The squat Mexican stumbled away from her, covering his face. He tripped over the boy and fell, and the girl kicked him, screaming with rage.

"Cabrons! Ladrones!" Her flashing eyes lifted to include all of them. "You theenk I am afraid of you, like the rest of my people! Bah! I am not afraid of you, Miguel Morales! Nor of all your ghosts!" She was half crying with rage, her breasts heaving with each indrawn breath.

The voice of the man she called Miguel Morales was like the purr of a jungle cat. "You talk too much, Lupe. Don't be deceived because this gringo is a fool and has interfered in matters which do not concern him. Perhaps, like the other one, he is not aware of what it means to make an enemy of Miguel Morales. But you know Lupe. Next time it will not be the whip you will feel!"

José had scrambled to his feet, Lupe's nails had left their bloody furrows in his fat face.

Miguel turned his regard on Hatfield. "You are a fool, señor. And all fools pay for their meddling, sooner or later."

Hatfield's hand brushed lightly across his gun butt. "Here is the cash Miguel. Will you wait to get paid?"

A sneer wrapped itself around the cheroot in Miguel's mouth. He shrugged slightly. "We'll meet again, señor—I promise!" He turned to his companions, his tone roughening. "Come! We have done with things here!"

José mounted his bronc and fell in behind the others. They rode away from that adobe hut, raising a small banner of dust that marked their passage across the flats, fading against the blue-hazed hills.

The girl's eyes searched the big Ranger's face. She seemed unembarrassed by her almost nakedness. Her breasts lifted defiantly under the strips of blouse clinging to her.

"You are very kind, señor—and foolish. Miguel will not forget!"

"Why did he have you whipped?"

"Because I know what's in Lost Canyon," she said. Anger was still bright in her eyes, making her defiant. "Because, señor, I am not afraid of their tales of monsters with which they frighten my people."

"Lupe!" The fat woman waddled out and draped her black shawl over the girl's shoulders. Her sharp tongue scolded. Hatfield knew enough Border Spanish to understand her. She was telling the girl to hold her tongue, if not for her own sake, at least for her mother and her brothers and sisters.

Lupe turned to look at Hatfield. Something glittered around her neck. The Ranger had seen it flash in the sun as she had stood over José. He caught a glimpse of it again—a gold chain and an odd-shaped locket.

"If you are wise, señor," she said, "you will not linger in these parts."

Her mother, pulling her toward the hut, turned a hostile face to the Ranger.

He shrugged. His smile was thin. "Perhaps I am no wiser than you, Lupe. . . ."

GALLEJO BROODED under the ochre cliffs. The mission dominated the town, as it had long ruled Gallejo in custom and morals. In the afternoon, just before the sun dipped behind the western hills, the huge shadow of the mission cross lay across the big plaza like a sign of judgment.

Old gold and silver mines, worked by the early Zunis and later by the Spaniards, had spawned Gallejo when Texas was not yet dreamed of by the handful of men who later gave their lives for it at the Alamo. Some of these mines were still being worked by hand and burro, ekeing out for their patient miners enough pay dirt to buy chile and corn and an occasional bottle of *pulque*.

Gallejo was the only town of any size within seventy miles of the county seat, and it was cut off from that source of law and order by country as bleakly inhospitable, as savagely barren and desolate, as could be found. Even the Spanish Conquistadores who had braved many hells in search of gold had skirted this land of black, burned hills, naming them *Los Perdidos*.

The brutal heat of early afternoon beat down on Jim Hatfield as the big Ranger rode Goldy into town. He stopped at the plaza where a large stone-rimmed community well invited. He gave two bits to the brown-faced boy who worked the winch to haul the bucket and, drinking from the wooden dipper the boy provided, he watched Goldy muzzle into the dusty water in the stone trough.

"The Border Bar, señor?" the boy said in answer to his question. "There—over by the express station."

Hatfield rode across the plaza, now deciphering the faded sign over the slatted doors. Only one horse nosed the short rail, a beautiful brown mare wearing an expensive saddle; light, not built for wear and tear of range work.

Dismounting, the Ranger dropped Goldy's reins over the hitch-bar, and pushed through the batwings.

Hatfield caught the glint of metal and whirled as he palmed his guns

It was at least ten degrees cooler inside. He felt the difference as he paused, adjusting his gaze to the change of light. He heard an angry mutter of voices and his attention swung in that direction, to two sombrero-topped Mexicans arguing drunkenly over the turn of a card.

Against the far wall, near the bar, a grotesque figure of a man seemed to be asleep, his sombrero pushed down over his face.

Plainly that room was reserved for drinking. The bar was of varnished wood. Behind it a fly-specked mirror gave Hatfield a blurred reflection of himself as he moved toward it.

At the far end of the counter a fat bartender with rolled-up sleeves was in a close huddle with a slender, rather tall man wearing whipcord breeches and a tailored tan jacket. Both men were peering intently into a long wooden box on the counter.

No one seemed to notice Jim Hatfield as he breasted the bar. The sleeper didn't stir; the drunks continued their argument; the man at the counter remained absorbed in what was in the box.

Hatfield put his foot on the rail and waited.

The man in the fawn-colored riding breeches, he now saw, wore gold-rimmed spectacles. It gave him a scholarly look which struck an odd note in this dingy Border bar.

He said, "It's my turn now, Ramos." He held out his right hand and the bartender gave him what looked like a long straw. He grinned. "Shall we say twenty pesos?"

Ramos grunted. "He's a lazy one, that

cucaracha! Even the prod will not move him."

"Ah, if you know where to prod, Ramos." The man with the spectacles reached down with the straw into the box. Ramos put his head close. Suddenly the slender man laughed gleefully and Ramos jerked his head back and cursed.

"The twenty pesos, Ramos." The winner held out his hand and Ramos, lifting a cigar box to the counter, counted out money.

"For me he is lazier than Juan Pelote's burro," he grumbled.

THE slender man had turned. Seeing Hatfield he made a slight gesture of apology.

"Oh, hello there. Ramos, you are neglecting a customer."

Hatfield edged over. "New game?"

The slender man waved disparagingly. Up close, Hatfield could see he was a middle-aged man who appeared youthful because of his slender build, his erect carriage. The man's hair, a tawny color, had streaks of gray in it. His eyes, behind the glasses, seemed a vague, watery blue.

"Cockroaches," the man said. "I always play Ramos for drinks when I come to town. I'm Dr. Alan Kerstin. Retired, I should add. You're a stranger to Gallejo, aren't you?"

The Ranger nodded. Kerstein was the man Captain McDowell had mentioned in his message; the man it had been suggested Hatfield should contact if he ran into trouble. At the moment he wanted to see Arch Darren. He didn't believe it was the time to make himself known to Dr. Kerstin. Not here, at any rate, in a bar in Gallejo.

"I've been a stranger in many places," he admitted drily. He jingled a few coins in his pocket, determined to play the rôle he had decided upon until something else came up to force him to discard it. "How many drinks will two American pesos buy at this establishment, Doc?"

Ramos was already pouring from a bottle of rye. Kerstin said amiably, "Save your money, stranger. Ramos will set up the next five rounds on me."

Hatfield said, "Thanks. Was a long and dusty ride." He let it go at that, leaving a faint impression that he was on the move not entirely of his own free choice. He lifted his glass. "To you, Doc—and to the cockroaches."

Kerstin nodded smiling.

"Pretty quiet town," Hatfield observed. He put his empty glass on the counter and Ramos filled it.

"The heat, señor," the barman grumbled. "But tonight, ah . . . Tonight—" Sweat made little oily drops on his round face. "Tonight is the fiesta of San José. Tonight Gallejo will celebrate. You will see."

"A wonderful event," Dr. Kerstin agreed. "Starts this evening, will continue for three days. Celebration begins with a solemn procession bearing gifts to the statue of San José in the mission. You came to Gallejo at the right time, stranger—if you're looking for excitement."

He seemed to be waiting for the customer to introduce himself, but Hatfield ignored the slightest pause.

"Sounds interesting," he admitted. His eyes clouded. "Might have to move on before the end of the celebration, though."

He saw Kirstin's eyes make a quick reappraisal of his appearance, linger briefly on his guns. The inference was natural. A gunman on the dodge.

The sound of someone running out in the plaza disturbed the momentary silence. Both looked to the door just as the runner burst through the batwings.

The boy's eyes were on Kerstin. "Doctor—come quick! Juan Pelote—he has a man, a gringo. He says he found him in the river!"

CHAPTER III

Helen Mayfield

JUAN PELOTE was a small brown ageless man as wiry and nimble as the goats which roamed the mesa behind Gal-

lejo. His eyes were like two small black marbles in his time-carved features; they glinted with the alert brightness of a sparrow's.

Jim Hatfield and Dr. Kerstin met him in the plaza by the well. A small group of wide-eyed children were clustered about the shaggy patient burro and its limp burden.

Juan took off his ragged straw sombrero as they joined him.

"Si, Señor Kerstin," he said respectfully in answer to the doctor's quick question. "This mornin' I find him—" he waved a casual sweep to the southwest—"near the crossin' where the Davis River makes the big bend into *el rio grande.*"

Hatfield was looking at Arch Darren's body draped over the burro's back. He had seen death too many times to be strongly moved; a man lived with it constantly when he took his Ranger oath. But Arch Darren had been young, with a youngster's zest for living. There was nothing that could be done for Arch now, but Hatfield shaped a silent promise to the dead man to avenge him.

Kerstein moved up beside the tall Ranger, his eyes narrowing behind his glasses. His fingers made their practiced examination of Arch's body. He frowned, turned to look at Hatfield.

"Neck broken! Twisted almost completely around! Bones in right shoulder crushed! Cheek-bones fractured!" His tone held a professional restraint. "Those marks on his face. Might be bruises from rocks in the river. But my guess is they were made by incredibly strong fingers! By the same hands which wrung his neck!" He took a deep breath, his eyes blinking behind the glasses. He added solemnly, "This man was dead before he went into the river!"

Jim Hatfield made no comment. The dead Ranger's holster was empty, which didn't mean too much. Darren could have lost the weapon in the river. Still, Hatfield found it hard to believe that anyone could have closed in on the young Ranger without Darren getting in at least one shot.

The sun was hot in the plaza; its hard glare lay across the Ranger's body on Juan's burro, which twitched its shaggy ears.

Kirstin mopped his brow with a white linen handkerchief. "This is the third man I've examined who has been killed in this manner," he said at last, in a bewildered tone. "Presumably by the same incredibly strong hands. Each man was fished out of the Davis River." His eyes seemed holding back a growing uneasiness. "Another one and I'll begin believing the Mex stories about monsters in Lost Canyon."

Hatfield asked flatly. "Did you know this man?"

Kerstin shook his head. "He was a stranger in Gallejo. I saw him once, last week, in the Border Bar. Struck me as being a rather cocky fellow. He was drinking beer and questioning Ramos about Lost Canyon. I remembered him especially because of one remark he made. There's no monster between here and hell a thirty-thirty slug won't whittle down to size!' "

Dr. Kirstin's voice mimicked Arch's almost perfectly.

"Sounds like Arch," Hatfield muttered.

Kirstin's blue eyes measured the Ranger with sudden caution. "You knew him then?"

"Name was Arch Darren," Hatfield replied. "I was supposed to meet him in the Border Bar this afternoon."

Juan Pelote shifted restlessly. His eyes sought the doctor's. "Señor Kerstin," he murmured, hat in hand. "I have lost a day's work bringin' him here. This I do not mind. But I am a poor man—"

ALAN KERSTIN reached in his pocket and tossed Juan a silver dollar. He turned back to Hatfield, his voice tinged with cold reserve.

"There's nothing more we can do for your friend," he pointed out. "Unless you have other plans, I suggest we let Juan take him to Vito Salvarez—local undertaker."

Jim Hatfield shrugged. Kerstin added another dollar to the one he had already

given Juan and ordered the old man to tell Salvarez that proper burial of the body will be arranged for later. The woodcutter muttered his "Gracias, señor," and left, the children trailing behind the burro.

During the moment the Lone Wolf was alone with the doctor in the square he came to the decision that he no longer had any reason to keep his identity or his business here from this man. On the contrary, with Arch Darren dead, he might have need of what help Dr. Kirstin could give him.

Hatfield was well aware that he had little enough to go on—just Captain McDowell's wire advising him to join Darren in Gallejo and look for a missing photograper named Henry Mayfield, and a bare hint that opium smuggling might be the real reason for Mayfield's disappearance.

"Did this man have any close kin?" Kerstin asked, interrupting the Lone Wolf's thoughts.

Hatfield shook his head. "Arch was pretty much on his own, Doc." He frowned. "You say you didn't know him?"

"Other than the one incident I mentioned, no." Kerstin eyed the tall man before him thoughtfully. "I am not often in Gallejo—only when I tire of my own company." He smiled apologetically. "I live up on the mesa, spend a lot of time puttering around. Looking for old bones. My servants think I'm *poco loco*." He made a small, disarming gesture. "That has little to do with your question, however. I saw him just that once, but I heard that he spent much time in the Cantina Rosados. Which was strange, for Ramos' bar is the usual hangout for the few Americans that come to Gallejo. There are about a half-dozen miners in the hills north of here—prospectors is the better term for them. Two cattle ranches east, along the Rio. I know all the regular hands by sight. But this—Arch Darren, you say?—was a stranger to me. We see few strangers in Gallejo. Men like you—" he spoke slowly, his gaze dropping to the Ranger's Colts—"seldom linger on this side of the river. Either riding away from trouble—or looking for it."

The Lone Wolf, building a cigarette, brought his match up to the limp smoke. "Darren was in Gallejo looking for it," he said shortly. "He was a Texas Ranger."

In Dr. Kerstin's eyes was a flash of surprise. He let silence fall between them, as he seemed to be fumbling for words.

"Well, he sure kept quiet about it," he finally muttered. He looked up sharply into the lawman's hard face. "Then you—you're—"

"Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger."

Kerstin mopped his brow again. "The Lone Wolf!" he mumured. His gaze slid off the Ranger's face apparently momentarily drawn by something in the hazy peaks which made a backdrop to the hot Mexican town. "I've been sort of expecting you," he muttered. "Ever since Henry Mayfield disappeared. But Captain McDowell could have let me know—" his tone held a faint resentment.

"Capain Bill McDowell asked me to get in touch with you," Hatfield admitted. "I planned to, after I'd had a talk with Darren."

Kirstin sighed. "I knew Mayfield was somebody pretty important," he said. "I didn't know he was important enough to interest the Rangers."

"Mayfield didn't go out into those hills just to take scenic pictures," the big Ranger said bluntly. "Nor was Arch Darrent sent here just to chase after Mayfield."

KERSTIN frowned. "You mean there's other trouble?"

"You are in a better position than I am to answer that," Hatfield said drily.

Kerstin bristled. "Are you implying—"

"Nothing," the Ranger interrupted quetly. "What do you know about this Border outlaw the Mexs call *El Zopilote Negro?*"

"The Black Buzzard!" Kerstin's lips held a supercilious sneer. "This country is full of superstitions, Lone Wolf. Stop in any cantina in town and you'll hear a half-dozen stories about lost mines guarded by Indian ghosts or watched over by the spirits of long dead Spanish conquer-

ors. Every two-bit ruffian who owns a horse and a pistol has a fancy name, and—"

"The killer of Arch Darren is more than a two-bit bandit, Doc!" Hatfield said sharply. "And there's more than just a bit of Border thievery behind his activities!"

"More?" Kerstin's blue eyes held a guarded questioning.

"Opium! A half-million dollars' worth so far. It's been pretty well established that it's coming in across the border somewhere in this territory."

Kerstin mopped under his hat. "Maybe I've been digging around for old Indian relics too long," he muttered. "I had no idea." He made a gesture toward the bar they had quitted. "Let's get in out of this damned sun where we can talk."

Goldy was waiting beside Kerstin's trim buckskin in front of the Border Bar. The big stallion turned his head as the riders approached. His whicker held a friendly questioning.

Kerstin, passing between the two animals, patted the sorrel's shoulder and jumped back quickly, crowding against his buckskin mare as Goldy bared his teeth.

Jim Hatfield said, "Sorry, Doc—he's a one-man horse. He moved up, sliding his hand reassuringly over the big sorrel's flank. "All right, feller. He's a friend."

Kerstin looked Goldy over, his face still pale. "Nice animal," he admitted grudgingly. "Built a little too heavy for my likes though."

When he saw Hatfield duck under the rack to get his back against the blank adobe wall he didn't finish his opinion of Goldy. There was a sudden deadliness in the big Ranger that swung the doctor about to see what was causing it.

The stage was coming into the plaza, its iron tires rumbling over the ancient cobbles. Five big-hatted, dark-faced men rode alongside, like some mounted guard. One of them—a fat mustached fellow—had a bandanno wrapped around his head.

They parted company with the stage at the plaza, swinging toward a side street.

The big Ranger came away from the wall, smiling. "Didn't know the stage line employed a gun guard, Doc. What are they shipping? Gold?"

Kerstin shook his head. "Neither. That hawk-faced hombre on the white horse is Miguel Morales. One of those two-bit bandits I mentioned. He and his men generally hang out in the Cantina Rosados. Don't understand what brought them to town now with the stage, Hatfield."

The Lone Wolf shrugged. "Let's talk about Morales over a beer."

"Just a minute." Kerstin had turned to watch the stage sweep around the well, sending a stray dog scurrying for cover. "I'm expecting a friend from St. Louis on this stage. Professor Vanelli."

The stage rolled past them and made a lurching turn, the iron-shod wheels striking sparks from the stones. It pulled to a stop before the stage station directly across the street.

THE driver, a pint-sized, roan-haired man with a thick, bristly mustache slightly lighter in color, tied his reins to the whip socket and took time to spit a stream of tobacco juice over the off wheel. He glanced at Kerstin and Hatfield who were approaching the stage.

"You run into trouble?" the doctor asked.

"Naw." The driver wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, took off his dusty hat and scratched his head. "Them riders come out of the brush about a half-dozen miles down the road and rode into town with me."

"They didn't bother you?" Hatfield asked.

"Naw." The driver patted his shotgun. But he spoke a little too quickly and his eyes betrayed uneasiness.

Jim Hatfield's searching glance went to a seraped Mexican sitting on his heels by the stage office. The man seemed to be dozing, but the big Ranger had a sudden feeling that the huge sombrero hiding the man's face also hid an alert curiosity.

An old Mexican and a fourteen-year-old youngster came out of the stage office. The youngster stood by while the oldster

reached up for the door handle.

A tall, well-built man in dark clothes stepped down from the stage, slapping dust from his coat. The man's back was to the Ranger and the doctor, but Kerstin, smiling pleasantly, pushed forward.

"Professor Vanelli!"

The man turned. Hatfield saw a smooth, dark-skinned narrow face decorated by a black military mustche that gave the man a cold and aloof arrogance. That impression was bolstered by full lips that curled with faint insolence as he made his quick appraisal of the two men approaching him with flaky gray eyes which contrasted oddly with the darkness of his hair and skin.

He nodded to Kerstin, murmured, "Hello, Alan."

Then he turned and reached out a hand to a girl stepping down from the stage. A slender, golden-haired girl in a blue taffeta traveling coat that reached to her gloves and balancing a tiny parasol. She looked pale and tired.

Professor Vanelli helped her to the board walk. She cast a quick look across the plaza. "Have they gone?"

Vanelli nodded. He turned to the doctor. "Perhaps my friend here can explain what happened, Helen." His smile revealed even white teeth, but little warmth. "Miss Mayfield, may I present Dr. Alan Kerstin?"

Kerstin bowed. "Henry Mayfield's daughter?" His tone held surprise and Hatfield wondered, was there annoyance, too?

The girl's smile was hesitant. "I wrote my father I would be in Gallejo today. I expected he would be here to meet me—" She seemed confused.

Kerstin hesitated. He glanced at the Ranger, as if seeking help before answering her. "Your father was a guest in my house, Miss Mayfield. He left to go on some sort of photographic expedition into the hills. That was more than a month ago."

"But my letter! Surely Dad must have returned since then, Doctor?" Her eyes, wide and candidly questioning, moved from Kerstin's embarrassed face to the Ranger's impassive features.

The doctor took advantage of this to evade her question. "Miss Mayfield—Professor Vanelli—this is Jim Hatfield, a friend. He's just arrived in Gallejo, also."

Vanelli nodded his acknowledgement with cold reserve. In the girl's eyes was a sudden warmth, an eagerness for which the tall officer could not account.

She held out her hand to him. "Oh, yes, Mr. Hatfield." She sounded relieved as if she had come upon an old friend.

VANELLI broke in, his voice somewhat curt. "You saw the armed escort we had, Alan? Is that something new?"

The doctor shook his head. "Never saw that happen before."

"Escort, hell!" the driver butted in. He was handing luggage down to the old Mexican and his boy helper. He paused to wipe his hands on his pants leg. "Morales had some reason for riding into town with us, and it warn't protection." He laughed harshly. "I'd say he was interested in the passengers. He's been followin' me into town the last two runs I made."

Kerstin made a wry face. "Shows how little I know of what's going on," he said. He turned his attention to Vanelli. "You look prosperous enough, Lou." His tone held a dry gibing. "Perhaps Morales imagines that an associate professor of anthropology travels about with a suitcase full of gold."

Vanelli did not take the joke in good grace. "I didn't like their looks," he snapped. "One of them even had the gall to ride up and look inside."

Helen Mayfield's little cry interrupted him. "Oh! My bag! The small brown one. I left it inside, on the seat!"

Hatfield, nearest the coach door, said, "I'll get it for you." He opened the door and reached in for the bag on the seat. Its weight surprised him. He stepped back to her, his brows making a quizzical arch. "What are you carrying, Miss Mayfield? A bag full of gold?"

A startled light flickered in the girl's

cornflower blue eyes. She smiled sweetly. "Not gold, Mr. Hatfield. Books. They are my constant traveling companions—"

Vanelli stepped between them, taking the girl's arm. "Alan," he said smoothly, "Helen is exhausted. I've taken the liberty of inviting her to stay at your house. Knowing the accommodations in Gallejo—"

"Why, of course," Kerstin agreed. "It will be a pleasure to have you, Miss Mayfield." His smile was pleasantly reassuring. "I assure you my housekeeper, Maria, makes a formidable chaperone."

Helen turned to the Lone Wolf. "Are you staying at the doctor's house, Mr. Hatfield?"

He hesitated.

"Of course!" Kerstin snapped. "I told you Hatfield's an old friend. I wasn't aware, however, that you knew him, Miss Mayfield."

"I don't," the girl replied sweetly. "And please call me Helen. I shall feel much more comfortable if you do, Doctor."

Her sweetness seemed to mollify Kerstin. He nodded, turned to the young Mexican helping the station agent.

"Rico! I want a carriage and the finest team in Milotti's stable! At once!" He tossed the boy four-bits and turned back to the girl, apologizing, "If I had known you would be my guest today I would have driven my own carriage to town, Helen. But I expected only Lou—"

"And a saddle horse is good enough for an old friend, eh?" Vanelli laughed. His laughter was like the regard of his eyes, cool and reserved. He was looking at the two horses nosing the Border Bar tie-rack. "A magnificent animal, that big sorrel, Alan," he remarked. "At least you did not intend for me to walk."

"That stallion belongs to Hatfield," Kerstin corrected. "And let me warn you now, Lou, he's a one-man horse. As I just found out." His smile was a trifle forced.

"Oh?" Vanelli reached inside his coat pocket and brought out a flat silver cigar case. He snapped it open and held it out to the Ranger, who smilingly refused. Kerstin took one.

Helen said, "Did my father leave any word with you, Doctor? Did he say how long he would be gone?"

Kerstin shook his head. "He left with a Mexican guide and a helper, Helen. They loaded three pack-horses, mostly with photographic equipment. That wet-plate camera of his is a bulky affair, isn't it? But I did expect him back before this."

Helen made a small gesture of resignation. "I'll wait for him. I'm a little worried—but I know Dad. Once he gets interested in his work—"

SHE didn't finish, and the silence was a little strained. Then Professor Vanelli made some remark about how Dr. Kerstin's latest archaelogical find—which was the reason for his coming all the way from the museu in St. Louis—gave every indication that a primitive civilization had existed in America several hundred thousand years before the Spanish conquerors set sail for the New World. The talk fell into that pattern until Rico returned, driving an old surrey with a tattered fringe top and pulled by a handsome pair of roan geldings.

Jim Hatfield excused himself. "I've just remembered some business I have in town, Doc. I'll be along later."

Kerstin shot a quick look at him. Behind the lenses, his eyes looked a strangely opaque. He shrugged. "Just follow the mesa trail, Jim. Can't miss it."

He turned away to help Vanelli load his and the girl's baggage into the surrey. In that moment Helen caught the Ranger's arm.

"I must see you, Jim!" Her voice was quick, urgent. She spoke as though she had known him a long time. "Before tonight. Before they get in touch with me. Captain McDowell said you'd be here in Gallejo, that you'd help—"

She was a good actress. Her tone and her manner changed abruptly as Vanelli came toward them. As she turned to meet him, her voice was casual.

"Then I'll see you at dinner tonight, Mr. Hatfield?"

He nodded, a little amused at the dark

scowl Vanelli gave him, and by the man's possessive attitude toward the girl. He watched the professor help Helen up to the back seat and climb up beside her.

Kerstin was already walking across the plaza to his buckskin.

A thread of annoyance moved behind Hatfield's impassive features. What had Helen Mayfield meant? Captain McDowell had made no mention of this girl. For all the Ranger knew Henry Mayfield did not even have a daughter.

But whoever she was, she was frightened of something. And she had not come to Gallejo carrying books in that brown leather bag!

What was she after?

CHAPTER IV

"I've Come for the Body!"

AFTERNOON shadows were lengthening now. That of the mission cross lay long and definite across the square, its tip broken by the rim of the community well. From where Jim Hatfield stood he could see the upper shoulder of the mesa. A portion of the trail lay like a thin brown band in the oblique beat of the sun.

The plaza, dominated by the white-walled mission at its western boundary, was the focal point for a half-dozen narrow streets which wandered like old goat trails through the maze of adobes which made up Gallejo.

The Lone Wolf built himself a cigarette. He wanted time to digest what had happened, and sort out a course of action. He was a hard man, with a restless vitality which long ago he had learned to discipline. From experience he had learned to pick up one loose thread in the pattern of trouble and invariably it would lead him to the tangled core of it.

He put the problem of Helen Mayfield behind him now and concentrated on Arch Darren. It didn't help that Arch obviously had disregarded orders and gone out on his own. But it did figure that Darren must have learned something in the week he had been in Gallejo.

In the background of his thoughts something glittered. He pulled it out and examined it. It was the odd-shaped locket he had seen dangling from a gold chain around the neck of the Mexican girl called Lupe. And it came to him now where he had seen it before. It had belonged to Arch Darren's mother and it was known by all who had known Arch well that his mother's locket generally adorned the neck of each successive love in his life.

That figured, too. Arch had been that kind. But the thought was harsh in the big Ranger that a woman had no place in the life he followed himself, and which had been Ranger Arch Darren's life.

Juan Pelote emerged into the plaza just as the bell in the mission belfry began tolling its early call to vespers. The tolling bell caused ripples of activity in the somnolent town. Bright-shawled women began converging on the plaza, heading for the open church doors.

Hatfield discarded his cigarette butt as the old wood cutter plodded toward the Ranger, nodding a greeting. It came to Hatfield again how Arch Darren had no close kin. The Rangers had been both home and family to him since he had turned sixteen. The least Hatfield could do for the young Ranger was to see that he had a decent burial.

He crossed the square and intercepted Juan tying his burro before a small cantina. Juan was looking forward to spending the rest of the afternoon over a bottle of *vino*.

"Vito Salvarez? Esta?"

Juan looked up at the tall Ranger, his wrinkled face breaking into smile. He pointed. "The street by the mission, señor. It is the last house on the left, just before the cemetery."

Hatfield walked back to Goldy, mounted, and rode toward the mission. Through the open doors he could see the shadowy figures in the gloom lightened meagerly by altar candles.

The road to which Juan had directed him was a narrow slot between high,

blank-walled adobe structures. Slanting sunlight reached down along the eastern walls, but left the street in shadow. Myriad sour odors wafted to the Lone Wolf as he turned into it.

An ox-drawn two-wheeled cart with a short, fat Mexican driver loomed up, all but blocking the narrow road. Jim Hatfield caught the quick, nervous regard of wet black eyes from under the huge sombrero. Then the Mexican turned the cart close to the right wall, allowing Goldy to edge by.

VITO SALVAREZ'S funeral parlors were at the far end of this street. The house was a two-story flat structure with two narrow windows on the second floor, one of them just above the ground level door. To the right of this door and joined to the house, a six-foot high adobe wall continued on for some thirty feet to join the cemetery wall which dead-ended this road. Midway in this wall, giving access to the courtyard within, were heavy double doors of oak, one of which was slightly ajar.

From his saddle the Ranger could see over the cemetery wall to the plaster crosses and kneeling angles. The burial ground sloped upward, meeting the sheer thrust of the mesa's south wall.

Hatfield dismounted, ground-reining Goldy in front of the house. He knocked on the door, waited a long minute and rapped again impatiently. This time the door opened almost immediately, as though the horse-faced man with the gray chin whiskers inside had been waiting. The undertaker's sleep-glazed eyes surveyed Hatfield with a trace of irritation.

"Yes, señor?"

"I wish to see the body Juan Pelote brought here a few minutes ago."

Salvarez's gray brows puckered. "But Juan said the Señor Kerstin—"

"I am a friend of Dr. Kerstin's—and of the dead man, also," Hatfield interrupted.

Salvarez shrugged. "But of course. I was having my siesta. The body is in back. This way, señor."

Hatfield followed the man through a dim-lighted front room which was permeated with the odor of flowers although none were at the moment in evidence. They crossed to a kitchen and through this to a long narrow room with a long zinc-lined bench under two high, narrow windows. The smell of formaldehyde was strong here. Several freshly varnished pine board coffins were set upright against the rear wall.

Vito Salvarez was looking at the Ranger, waving his hand toward the bench.

"He has been dead for some time, señor. The burial should take place soon. But, you understand, I was waiting for the good Dr. Kerstin to . . . *Madre de Dios!*" The exclamation burst from him as he turned his attention to the bench. He crossed himself hurriedly.

Hatfield frowned. "What's wrong?"

Salvarez seemed to have difficulty talking. He pointed. "Señor, I swear! The body! Juan helped me put him on the table. There! Under the windows."

Hatfield crossed the room. The coffins were lidless. None of them held a body. He turned to the side door, jerked it open. It opened into the courtyard where Salvarez's gilt-ornamented black funeral wagon was housed under a tin-roofed lean-to. Several hunks of granite bearing the marks of a stonecutter's chisel, and two molds for plaster crosses made a jumble against the cemetery wall.

The Lone Wolf crossed the courtyard to the double doors which led out to the narrow street. The heavy iron bar which locked these on the inside had been lifted away.

As he pulled one door open and stepped out into the street a sixth sense, developed by years of constantly living with danger, saved the Lone Wolf. From the corner of his eyes he caught a glimpse of a man's head and shoulder as they raised above the flat roof of the building opposite; caught the glint of metal in the bright sunlight.

He twisted violently, his right hand blurring, palming his Colt.

The knife fanned past his face with a baffled sigh, sank deep into the oaken door.

THE concussion from the Ranger's Colt rocked through that alley. On the roof a dark, pock-marked face was jerked out of sight. . . . Hatfield's slugs searched with baffled rage along the adobe rim.

The heavy reports faded. Hatfield backed slowly down that narrow thoroughfare, his eyes squinted on the roof where the knife-thrower had vanished. From behind one of the adobe walls a dog began barking.

The Ranger backed clear to the cemetery wall. A wrought-iron gate gave access to the gravevard from the street; but the gate was padlocked.

It was unlikely Arch Darren's body had been taken this way. The Lone Wolf hesitated. There was an unnatural quiet in the narrow street now. The dog had quit barking.

As far as he could see along that crooked street nothing moved. Only Goldy, waiting with trained patience—and the haft of the killer's knife still quivering in the door.

But the deserted aspect of the street rang a bell in the Lone Wolf's head. The big-hatted Mex driving the high-sided, two-wheeled cart! The tarp covering what Hatfield had casually taken to be grain sacks.

And he knew then the answer to the disappearance of Arch's body.

When he strode angrily back to the knife imbedded in the door Vito Salvarez's pale face peered at him from the inner doorway. The undertaker had not ventured out into his own courtyard. As he watched the Ranger pull the bone-handled knife loose. he called out:

"Señor, I swear I heard no one!" His tone was worried, frightened. "I was upstairs, as I told you, having my siesta."

Hatfield turned away. So someone had come for Arch's body. Why? The young Ranger was dead. Whatever it was he had learned had died with him. It was impossible to think of any reason why his body would be of value to anyone now.

But as he mounted Goldy, he recalled that Dr. Kerstin had said Arch had spent a lot of time in the Cantina Rosados.

It was not much to go on. But if Arch had been interested in something in the cantina, Jim Hatfield wanted to see what it was.

The Cantina Rosados was a big three-story adobe block set on a slight rise behind Gallejo, maintaining an air of sneering aloofness from the rag-taggle sprawl of alleys and adobes which clustered around the mission. A hundred years ago it had been an inn, and satin-padded carriages escorted by armored lancers had stopped here on their way to Santa Fe. Only the mission and the presidio, whose ruins were still visible east of town were as old as the converted inn.

Behind the cantina the crumbly talus slope of the mesa began. From the rim a man with a rifle could put a shot through one of the cantina's rear windows.

When Jim Hatfield rode up to the place the lengthening shadow of the massive mesa lay across the cantina.

Morales and his four men had come this way, and remembering Kerstin's remark that this was the Border killer's rendezvous, the Ranger had expected to find more than one bronc nosing the long rack.

Behind him, in town, the mission bell was still tolling. But here the stillness had a sleepy quality, as if the inn was removed from that part of Gallejo's life.

Warning moved its cautioning hand over the Lone Wolf. The cantina was too quiet, too peaceful!

He studied its square bulk, noting that a second-floor gallery completely encircled the building. An old adobe wall fenced off a wagon yard and storage sheds.

He rode to the open gateway and looked inside.

The ox-drawn cart he had seen before was pulled up by one of the sheds. The tarp, thrown back, revealed the rough boards of the wagon bed.

EXPECTANCY stirred in Jim Hatfield. Then caution laid its restraining hand on his eagerness. Either the men who had taken Arch's body were fools, or—

He pulled Goldy away and rode back to the rack beside the hipshot bronc. He

heard nothing and saw no one, and yet as he dismounted and headed for the door he knew that whoever had left that cart in plain sight in the wagon yard had wanted it to be seen.

The Lone Wolf put his hands on the batwings and pushed them inward. He went through, a big man light as a cat on his feet. His narrowed green eyes widened to adjust to the light change, instinctively he stepped aside from the creaking doors, and kept moving.

The present owner had made few changes in the one-time inn. Wide carpeted stairs came down into the big, low-ceiling room on the right, hugging the wall. The bar, directly ahead, had been lengthened to take up the entire south wall.

Liquor and women were the attractions which brought men to this cantina. The bar supplied one, and rooms upstairs provided the other.

At this moment however there was no great rush for either. In all that big, low-beamed room the Ranger saw only three men. The fat Mexican who had driven the ox-cart was sitting at a table close to the bar, a bottle of *cervasas* in front of him. He seemed to be asleep, his hat pulled down over his face.

A man at the bar, wearing the tight, bell-bottomed pants of a Spanish *vaquero*, was hunched over his drink. A wide, brass-studded cartridge belt encircled his lean waist. The handle of a Colt jutted prominently.

The bartender was a stringy, spare man with a dirty apron tied about his middle. He was wiping glasses and putting them in rows on the back shelf.

The sound of the Ranger's light footsteps intruded into the quiet of that big room but brought no response. Hatfield breasted the bar some ten feet from the solitary drinker and in the fly-specked back mirror he caught the flick of the man's quick glance.

Wicked laughter made its soundless echo in the Lone Wolf's head. The man at the bar was the knife-thrower he had glimpsed on the roof top across from Salvarez' funeral parlor!

Hatfield made his quick judgment of the scene. One at the bar, one behind it—and the fat Mex at the table. Somewhere in this big room was the joker.

The Lone Wolf well realized that there was a time for caution and a time to move boldly.

The bartender was coming toward him, wiping his hands nervously in his apron. Hatfield's hand dropped casually toward his belt, came up with the knife he had taken from Salvarez' door. His hand snapped forward, the blade making a glitter in the dim light.

The drinker jerked as the blade bit into the counter an inch from his glass. He spilled his drink and let it lay, turning a dark, pock-marked face to the Ranger facing him along the bar.

"You missed me the first time," Hatfield said bleakly. "Would you like to try again?"

The Mexican eyed him sullenly. "I don't know what you talk about," he muttered. "I have not seen you before."

"The body, amigo." The Ranger's voice was grim. "You remember the body in Vito Salvarez' back room?"

"I know nothing," the man repeated. There was in him the waiting of a crouched cat watching a pigeon feeding nearby.

THE bartender placed a bottle of whisky and a glass before the tall man at the bar. "You must be mistaken, señor," he said. "Tonello has been in the cantina since morning."

"And the fat one there—he, too?" The Ranger's smile was wintry.

"*Si*. Pancho has been here since—"

"You're a liar!" Jim Hatfield snapped. He turned and took two long strides to the table. Pancho's head came up as Hatfield loomed over him. His eyes made a desperate request of the man at the bar.

The Lone Wolf's iron fingers hooked into his shirt; he yanked the fat man to his feet.

"You had Arch Darren's body in your cart when I rode past you!" Jim Hatfield growled. "Where is it now?"

Pancho tried to twist away from the

force of the big man's narrowed green gaze. His round oily face took on a muddy tinge. He had not liked being the bait for this tall gringo and now he silently cursed Miguel Morales and his own moment of cupidity when he had assented to take what had seemed a small risk for more than a small fortune.

"I am only a poor *carretero*," he whimpered. "I know nothing of a body."

The Ranger backhanded him across the mouth. The Mexican fell over his chair and sprawled on the floor.

At the bar Tonello yanked the knife loose, tipped it back by his right ear for his throw. The Lone Wolf's right-hand Colt smashed heavily, the lead slug creasing the killer's palm, sending the knife spinning over the bar.

A man who had been hidden behind the wide stairs had waited too long. He had expected a man at the bar arguing with Tonello to be an easy target. But the play was not being run according to the script, and he was a poor ad-libber.

He stepped out into the room for a clear view of the big man who was moving along the bar like some jungle cat. Tonello, in desperation, had reached for his holstered Colt with a bleeding hand. He was fumbling with the slick butt when Hatfield's Colt chopped down across his head.

The joker with the rifle still hesitated a moment too long. When he did fire the Lone Wolf had already glimpsed him in the back mirror. The rifle slug smashed it.

He cursed wildly and jerked his rifle muzzle around to follow the big Ranger. He didn't get to fire a second shot. He saw the beginnings of the red flare at Hatfield's hip, and it was coincident with his death. He was limp when he fell forward, his carbine jarring from his lifeless hands.

The drift of acrid gunsmoke was toward the heavy ceiling beams. Pancho sat on the floor, whimpering. Then through the shocked stillness intruded the foreign sound of riders dismounting outside, and the pound of feet toward the doors.

Turning his back to the bar, the Ranger swept his left-hand Colt up to side his right. Facing the men piling into the cantina, he forgot one man—the bartender. When he sensed the man move it was already too late.

The whisky bottle had smashed against the back of his head!

CHAPTER V

Gold Is Where You Find It

NUMBNESS enveloped Ranger Jim Hatfield, making his motions slow, blocking his quick reflexes as he went down on his hands and knees, his eyes blurred with shock.

He was aware he still held his Colts. The pungent odor of whisky soaking his shirt was in his nose, helping to clear his head.

But for the moment he was helpless and he knew it. His muscles tightened instinctively, waiting for the shock and tear of lead. He saw a flurry of movement from the men crowding into the cantina, caught the glint of drawn guns.

A shot smashed angrily. Hatfield was surprised when he felt no pain. He shook his head to clear it, and the movement sent a roll of nausea through his stomach.

By the door the half-breed who had tried to kill the Ranger whirled on the man who had batted his gunhand down. A naked deadliness darkened his ugly features, held in check only by the more deadly barrier of the muzzle aimed at his belt.

"Morales wanted this man killed!" he snarled. "Who are you to stop me, Pedro!"

The man called Pedro was the compact, blue-eyed man with the snub nose whom Hatfield had seen earlier in the day with Morales at the Mexican *jacal*.

"When Miguel is not here, I give the orders, Ruiz!" Pedro snapped. "I know this man you would kill! He is a friend of mine!"

The words came through to Hatfield but they made no sense. Before this day he

had never seen this man in his life. Yet he was grateful for the respite it gave him. He took advantage of it to lurch to his feet. His head pounded and he almost blacked out. He staggered back against the bar and the counter edge, pressing against his back, gave him stability. His iron will pushed back his pounding weakness. He turned and hooked his left elbow on the bar and his Colt stopped the bartender as the man was lifting a sawed-off shotgun into sight.

"You'll live longer if you drop it, amigo!" Hatfield snarled.

Confused, the bartender slid the shotgun back under the bar. He brought his hands up quickly as the famous Lone Wolf of the Texas Rangers cocked the hammer of the Peacemaker before he placed his hand palm down on the counter in front of him.

Hatfield shifted his attention to the group of men by the door. Several of them he recognized as having been with Morales at the *jacal*. Ruiz he had not seen before. He was a gaunt, big-boned man with a scar under his left eye which looked as if someone had pushed a thumb into the flesh and imprinted it there.

For several drawn-out seconds Ruiz stared at the gun in Pedro's hand. Plainly he was a quick and violent man, and not used to backing down. But the man facing him had no give in him either. Pedro stood there like a block of brown granite, unsmiling, unyielding.

The other men shifted with uneasy neutrality.

Slowly Ruiz holstered his Colt. By that action he gave in to the man facing him, but his yellow-flecked eyes conceded little.

"Miguel shall hear of this!" he promised harshly. He turned on his heel and pushed through the men by the door, shouldering them aside. The batwings flapped behind him.

Pedro faced the others. "Any of you who think like Ruiz speak up now!"

José, the whip-wielder, eyed Hatfield with malevolent hate. "If he is your *ami-*

A TALL TEXAS TALE

SHREWD SHOPPER

WHILE Jughead Kwakkelstein was the most ignorant cowpoke at our Texas ranch (I doubt if he knowed how many z's there are in scissors) he was the cleverest shopper I've ever seen. Here's how he once gypped Ezra Hickenlooper at the general store.

He selected a saddle, changed his mind for spurs, changed again to chaps, finally decided on a pistol and started out. When Ezra reminded him that he hadn't paid for the gun, he said, "I gave you the chaps for the gun."

"But you didn't pay for the chaps," said Ezra.

"I gave you the spurs for the chaps," he said.

"But you didn't pay for the spurs!" exclaimed Ezra.

"I gave you the saddle for the spurs," said Jug.

"Ah, but you didn't pay for the saddle!" shouted Ezra.

"Of course not," said Jughead. "I didn't take the saddle, so why should I pay for it."

He then walked huffily out, the gun clutched in his hot little hand, and though Ezra admitted that the reasoning was sound he felt that somehow he had lost on the deal.

—W. L. Hudson

go, Pedro, he is not mine!" He, too, went out, slamming the batwings hard against the wall in his passage.

The others remained with the stocky Morales rider, Pedro, eying Hatfield noncommitally.

AT LAST Pedro moved away from them, holstering his Colt. With a light, sure stride he crossed the room to the bar.

"Greetings, Jim," he said. A tough grin which touched off reckless lights in his blue eyes broke over his face. "It's been a long time since we split a bottle of *tequila* between us."

The Lone Wolf hesitated a bare moment. He didn't know this man from a sheepherder in Montana. But the man had saved his life. He grasped Pedro's blunt, strong palm.

"Back there at the *jacal*," Pedro said, "I was not sure it was you. And you seemed not to be in the mood for talking over old friendships, eh?" His laughter was quick and friendly. "It's been all of three years since that day in San José. Do you still call yourself Jim Wade?"

A flicker of understanding came and went in the Lone Wolf's eyes. The man was feeding him his lines. but he was quick enough to take it from here.

"It is still Jim Wade, Pedro," he acknowledged.

Pedro turned and waved to his companions. "First we will drink with my friend," he said. "Then we will take care of Tonello and Sebastian."

The Lone Wolf shook his head. At this point he would do a little revising of the play Pedro had thrust on him. He had come into the cantina for Arch Darren's body. He meant to leave with it!

"Later, Pedro, we will drink! After I have finished my business here!"

He saw the smile fade from those blue eyes, but the grin remained on Pedro's lips. Hatfield pushed past the man to Pancho who had regained his feet and was staring at them with obvious bewilderment.

"Where is he?" Jim Hatfield rasped. "The body you brought here?"

Pancho wet his thick lips. "Upstairs. In Lupe's room." He glanced at Pedro, his cow eyes pleading. He found no sympathy in the blocky man's regard.

"Those were Miguel's orders before he left!" Pancho's voice was a thin squeak of desperation. "I was to bring the body here and leave it in Lupe's room as a warning to her. Tonello and Sebastian were to make sure he—the gringo—" He petered off, shrinking from the tall man's cold regard.

"I am changing the orders," the Lone Wolf said bleakly. He turned to Pedro. "Do you wish to question me?"

Pedro shrugged. "Miguel made a mistake," he said. "Had he known you were the notorious Jim Wade, he might have made other plans."

Hatfield nodded. "I came here to get Arch Darren's body. He was a friend of mine, Pedro." He was still holding his Colts; he eased the muzzles up gently. "Will you and your amigos come to his funeral?"

It was a question, delivered dry and informally. But the hard thrust of his narrowed gaze made it an order understood by every man present.

The laughter came again to Pedro's blue eyes. In his voice was a reckless note of admiration. "*Si*, Jim. We will attend the funeral of your friend."

The sun was down behind the mesa, but the afterglow was in the sky, marking the headstones in the cemetery with a pale greenish light. Arch's body had been brought there in Pancho's cart. Salvarez provided the pine box and the tools for digging. Pedro's companions used them.

Summoned from the mission, the *padre* said his prayer over the grave.

BEHIND him Morales' men stood in sullen silence. When it was over and the grave covered over, Jim Hatfield shook hands with Pedro.

"I have some urgent business," he said quietly. "But I'll be back for that drink, Pedro."

The blocky man nodded. He watched

Hatfield turn away, walk to the big golden stallion waiting by the cemetery gate. . . .

Helen Mayfield had waited for the appearance of the Lone Wolf with increasing impatience. Now, as the afternoon wore on, the small talk in the big living room in Dr. Kerstin's mesa house began to pall on her. Professor Vanelli's obvious attentions were flattering, but the worry within her was too deep-seated to discard it easily, and she was conscious that he was becoming annoyed by her inattentiveness.

She excused herself finally and was shown to her room, a spacious one with French doors opening onto the patio. Dr. Kerstin, she noticed distractedly, must have spent a small fortune building this house. The pleasing fragrance of wisteria wafted into the bedroom which had been furnished with a bachelor's eye to comfort. The few feminine touches, like the cut flowers in a vase on the small table, were evidently of Maria's doing.

The attractiveness of the room touched Helen, but was again thrust aside by her worry, by the long strain she had been under since she had received her father's letter. Through the long journey to this hot and primitive Border town she had clung to the slim hope offered her by Ranger Captain McDowell who had assured her:

> I've got my best man down there, Miss Mayfield. Jim Hatfield. Contact him as soon as you arrive in Gallejo. If anyone can help you, Jim will.

What was keeping the Ranger?

She sank down on the hand-carved four-poster bed and reread the letter which had taken her from a comfortable home in Dallas to this place. It was from her father. How well she knew his writing! And his signature at the end of it.

> Dear Helen. I am being held prisoner here. My captors want $20,000 in gold. I have been assured I will be released unharmed once they get the money.
>
> Fortunately, before I left I had arranged things at the bank so that you would have access to my deposits. Believe me, it was with no idea you would ever be called upon to do this which I now ask. Withdraw the money. Insist on gold coins. Come to Gallejo with it. My captors will get in touch with you there. Under no circumstances should you let anyone know of this letter. . . .

She felt a depressing sense of guilt now, reading this. By her action in contacting Captain McDowell she had ignored her father's emphatic warning. Yet it had been Henry Mayfield's own, and at the time enigmatic, request to her before leaving for this photographic trip into the *Los Perdidos*, to get in touch with the Ranger chief at once if anything happened to him.

Her toe touched the stuffed leather bag by the bed. The Ranger's casual remark had been a shrewd guess. There was twenty thousand dollars in gold in that locked bag!

She heard the light tapping on the patio windows and, turning, saw one of Kerstin's Mexican servants beckon to her.

She walked to the French doors, unlatching and opening one. An old man outside bowed apologetically and handed her a folded piece of paper. He smiled, bowed again, and turned away.

She stood in the doorway and read the terse note:

> Señorita Mayfield. You will take the bag with the money to the old presidio on the hill east of Gallejo. You will be there at sunset. If you wish to see your father alive, come alone!

It was unsigned.

SHE looked out into the patio where the shadows from the west wall were long. She could not wait any longer for Hatfield. She had to leave now.

But a sense of foreboding made her place her father's letter, with the note she had just received, on the dresser. If something happened to her, and she did not return, those letters would explain to the big Ranger and Dr. Kerstin her urgency and her mission.

She hurried back to the big living room, and not finding her host or the professor, continued on into the large north wing where Dr. Kerstin kept many of his "Indian relics" as he called them. Primitive artifacts, old stone spearheads, flint arrowheads. Wooden cases containing broken pottery, shells, fossilized bones.

Facing her now, as she enteerd through the wide archway was a huge window

which looked down into a darkening canyon. Across this gash in the brown and desolate earth rose the scarred and broken peaks of the *Perdidos.*

Two men stood beside one of the wooden cases talking. Professor Vanelli looked up at her appearance with a smile.

"I'm glad you have rejoined us, Helen." He started toward her.

She smiled a tense greeting. "Doctor," she said hurriedly, "I've a favor to ask of you. I would like the loan of your surrey. I'm quite capable of handling the team. But I must have the use of it immediately."

Kerstin was genuinely surprised. "Why, of course, Miss Mayfield. But Lou here or I would be only too glad to—"

"Please! It is something I must do myself. I'll explain it all to you, later!"

Kerstin shrugged. "I'll have one of my men get the surrey ready for you at once."

"Thank you, Doctor. I—I think I'll change into something more comfortable. If you'll excuse me again."

In fifteen minutes Helen had changed into blouse and riding skirt and tan leather jacket. The surrey was standing by the door when she appeared, carrying her small bag.

Both men noticed it, but made no comment. Vanelli helped her up to the driver's seat. "I'd feel better if I could come with you," he murmured.

She hesitated only a moment before she said faintly, "I must go alone. I will not be gone long."

They watched her drive out through the big gate. Vanelli turned on Kerstin. "I'm going after her, Alan."

The doctor put a hand on his arm. "It's that bad?"

Vanelli looked at him. "It's that bad." And added bitterly, "I didn't want it this way, Alan, believe me!"

The sun was down when Helen Mayfield drove through the crumbly adobe gateway of the old presidio and pulled up before the doorless structure that had once housed Spanish soldiers. The quiet of evening lay over the deserted grounds and windowless buildings tenanted now only by pack rats and scorpions.

Helen sat still, looking about. She sensed motion in the darkness of the building nearest her, then a tall, hawk-faced man came to the doorway.

He stood a long moment eying her. She saw the glint of the gun in his hand and terror mounted in her, choking her. He came toward her then, lowering his gun.

"I am Miguel Morales," he said. He smiled, but it was the smile of a hawk and it offered no reassurance. "You have brought the money?"

Helen nodded. She caught more movement in the shadows beyond the rim of her attention. Her fear deepened.

"I have the money. Where is my father?"

Miguel held out his hand. "The money first, señorita!"

HELEN hesitated—and in the brooding silence intruded the quick pound of a rider heading for the gateway. It changed completely the quiet cruelty of the man standing by the surrey.

He stepped back and faced around like some evil shadow. Helen's recognition of Professor Vanelli as he rode into the yard broke a shrill cry which was beaten down by the heavy explosion of Miguel's gun.

Vanelli seemed to have run into an invisible wire. He jerked backward and fell limply. The buckskin, whirling like a cat, broke for the freedom of the trail outside the presidio.

The geldings hitched to the surrey reared, frightened by the explosion so close to them. Helen fought them, white-faced, with detached terror. Miguel's strong hands helped quiet them.

He made a quick gesture toward the shadows and a man broke away from them, carrying a rifle. He crossed the yard at a silent run, pausing briefly beside Vanelli's still figure, then coming to a halt at the gateway. He waited there, listening.

Miguel turned to the girl, his black eyes glittering. "So you did not come alone!"

"I didn't know he was following me!"

Her voice was shrill, breaking loose from her terror. "Believe me, I told no one where I was going!"

Miguel sneered. The surrey tipped to his weight as he took a step upward. His fingers closed over her arm, hurting her. "The money?"

With her free hand she picked up the bag, handed it to him. He stepped down, pulling her with him.

He tried to open it, found it locked and held out his hand. "The key!"

She handed it to him. The rifleman was coming back across the yard.

"My father!" she cried. "You promised he would be given his freedom."

Miguel shoved her away. "Lari!" he ordered brusquely. "The horses!"

Lari faded into the shadows. Helen watched Miguel reach inside the bag, break open one of the paper rolls of double eagles. His teeth gleamed in the pale starlight.

Her father was not here! They had never intended to let him go! Faced with the physical impact of this man, she doubted now that her father was even alive.

Sobbing with sudden terror, she turned and ran.

Miguel was after her like a cat. He caught up to her within ten yards, tripped her. He stood over her, grinning.

"You will ride with Lari," he said. "If you are as wise as you are beautiful, you will give him no trouble."

Helen lay there, too stunned to offer further resistance. Lari came up, leading two horses. He was an older man than Miguel, and because he was a half-brother there was the same cruelty in both; the same indifference to suffering.

Lari reached down and jerked Helen to her feet. "Mount!"

She shrank from the feel of his sliding hands and he grinned with sudden relish. She pulled herself stiffly into the saddle of the roan.

Miguel watched Lari mount, grasp the roan's reins. He nodded. "I will meet you at the old hideout, after my return. We will go into Mexico together."

He watched Lari and the girl pass through the gate. His thoughts moved on then to the rendezvous in Mexico, to the last job he intended to do for El Zopilote. He had been coming to this decision a long time. This job had been his own planning —other than Lari no one knew of it. Not even El Zopilote.

He sneered his defiance into the stillness. Morales was his own man—he had never liked working for another. Not even for the strange, deadly rider known as the Black Buzzard!

He went back to the horse he had hidden behind the deserted building and stuffed the gold coins into his saddle-bag. He tossed the empty bag aside before mounting.

CHAPTER VI

Juan O'Brien

HATFIELD found Kerstin's buckskin grazing along the mesa trail. He recognized the animal. It shied away from him as he spurred Goldy close, but the rider leaned out swiftly and caught the trailing reins.

The buckskin's presence here, riderless, reins trailing, told only part of the story. Hatfield tried to guess at the whole of it. If the buckskin's rider had been thrown, he had not been thrown on the mesa trail.

The Ranger swiveled in saddle to look down on Gallejo, a spatter of dim lights on the night-darkened slope. The faint breeze brought sounds of merriment. When he'd left town the plaza had already begun to echo with the sounds of fiesta.

But there was something quietly ominous about the riderless buckskin. The Ranger reached out and stroked Goldy's muzzle.

"Let's drop in on the doc," he muttered. "I'm afraid there's been trouble."

Kerstin must have been expecting it. He met Hatfield in the yard as the Ranger rode in, leading the buckskin. His voice came in a quick tight bark:

"What happened, Jim? Where did you find her?" He was referring to the mare.

Hatfield told him.

The doctor's voice was worried. "Lou was riding her. He went out after Helen."

Hatfield swung down beside him. His tone was curt. "Mayfield's girl? Where did she go?"

Kerstin made an unhappy gesture. "She asked to borrow my surrey. Said she had to go somewhere—alone. Vanelli decided to follow her."

From the darkness in the yard an old Mexican shuffled forward, halting respectfully, waiting. Kerstin turned to him. "Yes, Luis?"

"The señorita. I gave her a note." The servant's voice was halting. "A rider came to the gate this afternoon. He gave me a note. For her alone, he said. He gave me five pesos."

Kerstin swore. "You should have told me!" He turned to the Ranger. "She took that bag with her—the one she said contained books. You think—"

"I'm guessing," the Lone Wolf growled. "The same as you are." He turned toward the house. "She might have left that note behind. It's a chance."

They found both letters on the dresser. Kerstin read them over Jim Hatfield's shoulder, his eyes seeming to dilate behind the lenses.

"So that's it!" he said angrily. "Ransom money for Henry. Doesn't sound like opium smugling to me, though. Just some two-bit bandit who thought he saw a way to make some easy money."

The Ranger shrugged. "Whatever it was, it backfired on Vanelli," he said. He turned to leave the room.

Kerstin hurried after him. "Where are you going?"

"To the presidio."

"Wait. I'm coming along."

They rode out together, taking the mesa trail and breaking away from it at the juncture with the old trace that led up to the ruined fort. The night was dark. Only a crinkle of moon, like an orange slice, loomed over the western hills.

A shadow stumbled through the ghostly break in the presidio's ancient walls as they rode up. It emerged into a patch of pale light and the moonlight glowed on a white shirt strangely marred by what looked like an ink blot.

Kerstin's voice whipped out:

"Vanelli!"

The wounded man lurched toward them. His voice rang with a hard, bitter revelation. "Doublecrossed, Alan—"

Then his knees folded and he fell.

HATFIELD rode past him while the doctor dismounted and knelt beside Vanelli. The Ranger found the surrey in the shadows by the far wall, the geldings nibbling at spiky grass. He rode completely around the silent buildings and found only Helen's abandoned bag. He studied the hoofs marks in the yard, separating them from those of the geldings. When he rode out to join Kerstin he know that two men with three horses had waited for Helen, that they must have planned to take her with them.

Kerstin's glasses, reflecting starlight, hid his eyes. But his voice held a cruel and bitter ring.

"Lou's hurt pretty badly. I've got to get him back to the house."

Hatfield rode back and got the surrey and when he drove it back, helped raise Vanelli into the small bed.

Kerstin asked, as the Ranger mounted Goldy, "Where are you going, Jim?"

"To Gallejo," the Ranger answered. "There's a girl back there who knows why Arch Darren died. I've a hunch she knows quite a bit about a place called Lost Canyon—and what is going on there."

Kerstin's voice was sharp. "If I can be of any help—"

"Get a message to Captain McDowell," the Lone Wolf suggested. "Tell him what happened to Arch. I'll get in touch with you as soon as I can."

He waved briefly, turned Goldy down the mesa trail. Kerstin watched him fade into the night. Then he tied the buckskin to the buggy and climbed into the driver's seat.

Lupe Valdez finished her voluptuous dance, twirled her red skirt and pushed through the crowded tables, evading pawing hands. She had arrived at the cantina late and, changing hurriedly in her room, had come down immediately to go into her routine. Because she was late she had added an extra number to her routine.

And while she danced her eyes had searched that smoke-hazed room, looking for the tall, slim gringo who had given her the locket which glittered at her neck. He was not in the crowd at the tables, nor was he at the bar which had been taken over for a third of its length by Morales' men.

She was not particularly alarmed. Arch had promised to be here tonight. Most likely he would be waiting in her room, to surprise her. She had opened her window purposely, and Arch had come to her before by way of the veranda.

She did not see Morales at the bar, but she did not stop to ponder this, for her thoughts were on Arch. She made her way to the stairs, quickened her step.

There had been whispers among the other girls; guarded whispers. Lupe shrugged. She did not care for their whispers. They were envious of her.

She went up swiftly, her skirts rustling. She went into her room, closing the door quickly behind her, leaning against it, her breathing still hurried.

A man's deep voice said: "Sit down, Lupe."

She whirled. She recognized the man in the chair immediately—the broad-shouldered gringo who had stopped José from using his whip.

She did not sit down. Her disappointment made a sullen pout of her carmined lips.

"Sit down," Hatfield repeated. "I'm Arch Darren's friend."

"Arch!" Lupe's voice was a quick whisper. Her eyes searched the bedroom, came back to the Ranger's dark face. "Where is he?"

"You knew Arch?" Hatfield's voice was toneless.

"Yes . . . yes. He was—" She stopped, her eyes suddenly suspicious. "Who are you?"

"His friend. I was to meet him a Gallejo today."

HER hand went to her mouth; fear glistened in her eyes. "He is not here? He has not returned from Lost Canyon?"

Hatfield shook his head. "Didn't you know? Arch is dead!"

The impact of his words drained Lupe's face of color. She looked old and tired, and the rouged patches on her cheeks were ugly blotches.

"They killed him! I warned him not to go—" Her voice broke.

"Arch Darren was a Texas Ranger," Hatfield said sharply. "Did you know that? Did he tell you what he was looking for in Lost Canyon?"

She shook her head. "I didn't know who he was. Only that he—was kind to me. I didn't care to know more." She pulled herself together, her eyes suddenly hard, her mouth cruel. "Miguel must have known, this morning, when he and his men rode to my mother's house. He knew Arch was dead."

Hatfield showed her his badge. "I'm a Ranger, too, Lupe. And I was Arch's friend. Tell me what is in Lost Canyon. Show me how to find it."

She hesitated. She looked more tired now, and uncaring. "Lost Canyon," she said, "is the place of hairy monsters. It is where the American, Henry Mayfield, is a prisoner. It is where El Zopilote Negro waits. It is the place where opium, picked up in Mexico, is delivered. You wish to go there? I will show you, like I showed Arch."

She turned to the dresser, took a small box and scattered rice powder on its surface. With her index finger she traced a map, with Gallejo as its starting point.

"The *Los Perdidos* are here, north of the mesa. Here, between the rock that is shaped like a kettle and that which is like a hammer, if one searches closely, he will find a way down into the river canyon—"

Suddenly she gasped. Her eyes went wide, the pupils staring, seeming to plead with silent desperation. She turned to face the Ranger, her lips parting.

There had been no sound. But the knife which had buried itself in the side of her neck began to rim with blood. She slipped sideward, her fingers trailing through the powder, wiping out the marks she had made.

Jim Hatfield spun around before she fell. A light breeze moved the drapes at the window. Outside on the darkened veranda a man moved.

Thrusting aside the drapes and, Colt in hand, the Lone Wolf twisted over the low sill. He was in time to see a dark figure head down the veranda, glance back, and break for the railing. He was gone as the Ranger broke into a run.

Where the man had vanished the Ranger paused. It was a ten-foot drop to the darkness below. He hesitated only a moment.

He landed on flexed legs, whirled, and caught sight of the killer legging it for the talus slope behind the cantina. The Lone Wolf's Colt came up. His thumb clamped down hard on the cocked hammer.

The running figure had stumbled, pitched forward. In the faint light Hatfield could see the knife buried between his shoulders!

Close under the balcony a shadow moved.

Hatfield swung around, his Colt leveling swiftly.

A familiar voice came quick through the night:

"Jim! Jim Hatfield!"

The Lone Wolf crouched, his eyes narrowing on Pedro's blocky figure moving out of the shadows. Earlier this man had saved his life, and had called him Jim Wade.

Now he was using the Ranger's real name!

"Who are you?" he snapped. "You're not one of Morales' men!"

The stocky knife-thrower grinned. "I am Juan O'Brien, Jim. Captain in the Mexican Rurales!"

SURPRISE held the Lone Wolf motionless. He had heard of this man, though he had never met him. Captain O'Brien was as famous in Mexico as Jim Hatfield was in Texas.

"That explains a lot, Juan," he said. "But not what you are doing here."

The Mexican shrugged, misinterpreting the Lone Wolf's remark. "I was waiting outside, when I saw you, Jim. You were on foot and you came this way and disappeared. A few minutes later I saw that one"—he pointed to the still figure—"and he seemed to be following you. I waited, then I lost him. I was down here, looking, when he came down almost on top of me."

The Ranger's voice was grim. "Who is he? Another of Morales' men?"

Juan O'Brien shrugged. He walked to the dead man, retrieved his knife, wiped the blood on the dead man's clothes. He turned him over and looked into the thin face.

"I have not seen this one before," he muttered.

Hatfield's thoughts went back to Lupe. There was nothing he could do for her, just as there had been nothing he could do for Arch Darren—except bury him. He had a moment then, of depression. The thought came to him that some night a bullet or a knife would find him. He pushed the thought aside and turned to Captain O'Brien.

"What brings Juan O'Brien to Gallejo?" he asked.

Juan shrugged. "The same thing that brings the Lone Wolf here. Opium. And a man who calls himself El Zopilote Negro." He made an impatient gesture. "The opium comes from my country, Jim. Sometimes it is a shipment from China, unloaded at some deserted coastal cove, picked up by others and transported north to a rendezvouse with Morales. But always these shipments have gone north—to Lost Canyon, then across the Rio Grande."

Hatfield's voice was grim. "Who is this El Zopilote? Morales?"

Juan shook his head. "Morales is his *segundo*. Sometimes I suspect Miguel has

bigger ideas, but—" He shrugged. "I have been riding with Morales for three months. In that time I have been to Lost Canyon once. I saw El Zopilote that time only. A strange man, dressed all in black. Rides a black horse. Looks like a rich *haciendado,* a grandee, mixes Castillian Spanish with fluent English. When he speaks, which is seldom."

Hatfield frowned. "Did you see Henry Mayfield?"

Juan shook his head. "It was night. We did not go all the way into the canyon. El Zopilote met us on the river trail. We were paid off and rode back. Only Morales was permitted beyond the turning of the Hammer."

"What?"

"Si." Juan lapsed momentarily into Mexican. "Miguel called it that. Above the canyon trail, against the stars, there is a rock, a huge rock that looks like some mighty hammer about to strike. Here El Zopilote met us."

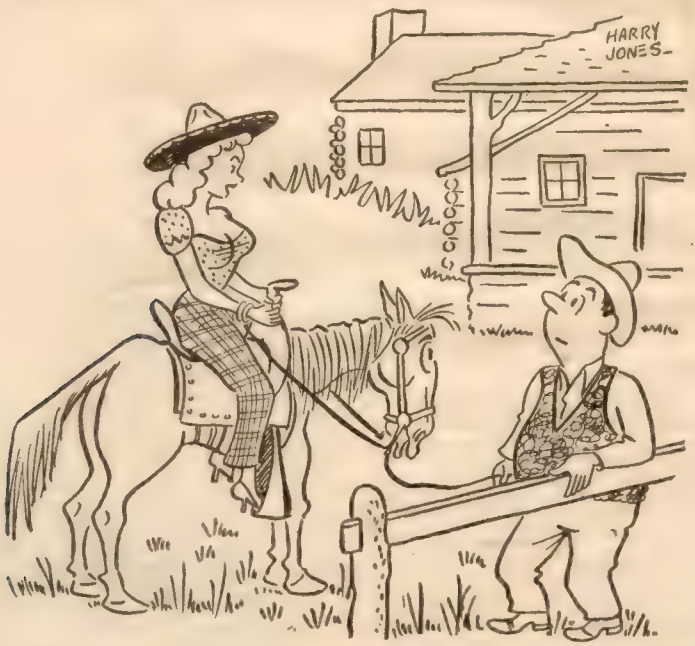
The Ranger wondered if Arch Darren had gone beyond the turning of the Hammer. The thought sent a chill through him.

"You saved my life today, Juan," he muttered. "That was quick thinking in the cantina."

Juan grinned. "We are after the same thing," he pointed out.

It came to Hatfield in that moment that if Lupe had not known Arch was a Ranger, it was quite possible that Morales did not know. Juan had started something this afternoon that, if followed through, could lead to Lost Canyon.

"You have told Morales' men I am Jim Wade," he said sharply. "You have told them I am your friend. If they accept you, they will accept me. I want to ride with you on the next rendezvous in Mexico. Do you think you can convince Miguel?"



"I know how to start it, and here's the horn, but where's the brakes?"

JUAN'S eyes lightened recklessly. "Why not?" he murmured. He glanced down at the dead man. "What about him?"

The Ranger indicated a brush-choked gully. "It will be morning before he is found. We might well be gone by that time, Juan."

They hid the body and came back, walking toward the front of the cantina Hatfield suddenly pressed back into the shadows, pulling Juan with him.

"Morales!"

The lean cruel figure of the Border chief was pulling up by the crowded rail. He made room for his white stallion, and headed for the doors, disappeared inside.

Jim Hatfield's thoughts went back to the presidio—to two men and three horses. To a girl who had been tricked into a rendezvous. A girl he had ignored.

If she was still alive, he would find her. And the quickest way was through Miguel Morales. And the way to Morales lay with this strange man at his side, this Juan O'Brien who looked Irish, though Mexican, and was afraid of nothing.

"We were in the Pecos Bar, Pedro," Hatfield said thinly. "Should they want to know. We were talking of the old days, in Caochillo. Shall we go?"

Captain O'Brien let his palm drift lightly over his Colt butt. "Why not, Jim—Wade!"

CHAPTER VII

Out of the Night

MIGUEL MORALES was at the bar, flanked by his men when the Lone Wolf and Captain O'Brien entered. Ruiz, the ugly, scarred one, saw them first. He whispered something in Miguel's ear.

The hawk-faced leader turned to face the two approaching men. Along the bar line his men also turned. The little alarms that went along the bar line extended into the big room, quieting loud talk. Men were intent on the two heading for the bar.

Juan said easily, pausing beside the Border boss, "Miguel, I want you to meet an old *amigo*. Jim Wade. He is well known—up north."

"We've met before," Morales sneered. "You have not forgotten, Pedro?"

Juan was not disturbed. "Some men have a soft spot in them for dogs, some for women. He heard a scream, he came to see—" Juan shrugged. "It was that, and nothing more, I assure you, Miguel. And I was not sure then that it was my old friend—"

Ruiz spat deliberately onto the floor.

Miguel eyed Jim Hatfield without humor. His eyes withheld their judgment.

"Since when, Pedro?" he asked softly.

"Three years ago, in Caochillo. He was selling a herd of Texas cattle to which he had no bill of sale."

Nothing in the Lone Wolf's face betrayed his admiration for Juan's easy lying.

Miguel scowled. "You showed a great interest in a man named Arch Darren." He said to Hatfield, "Why?"

"Arch was a friend of mine," Hatfield answered bluntly, gambling that Morales did not know Arch was a Ranger.

Ruiz sneered.

Miguel snapped, "A friend?"

"We got into a scrape with the law in Oklahoma," the Ranger growled. "Arch and I separated. I got word from him later. He wanted me to meet him here, in Gallejo. He said he had a line on a good thing and wanted in on it."

Morales was intent. "Did he mention this good thing?"

Hatfield shook his head. "I was to meet him this afternoon. When I saw him, he was dead." He looked at Ruiz and the others along the bar line, his eyes challenging them with rakish insolence. "A dead man ought to be let alone," he said. "And he was a friend of mine."

Morales was undecided. That indecision passed across his face.

Juan edged in smoothly, "He did only what any of us would do, no, Miguel?"

His tone lowered meaningly. "We've had a sample of what he can do best. Surely we can use such a man."

Ruiz stepped away from the bar. "How do we know he is what you say, Pedro? He says Arch was his *amigo*. But Arch asked too many questions about Lost Canyon, he was too friendly with Lupe." His voice carried his doubts; his eyes an uncompromising hate. He added, "You say, Pedro, he did what any man would do for his friend. I, too, remember that Sebastian was my *amigo*."

"Shut up!" Morales was smiling, his thoughts withdrawn behind the opaque screen of his eyes. "Pedro is right, Ruiz. We can use Jim Wade."

He motioned to the bar. "Drink up, all of you. We leave at midnight, and it will be a long dry ride."

It was then that a girl screamed! She had found Lupe Valdez' body. . . .

AGAINST the blazing stars the peaks loomed dark and ominous. Silence lay heavy in the small valley, disturbed only by two riders who had drifted into it from the north. Ahead the dry valley narrowed, passed through broken shoulders of sandstone. Then beyond the way lay clear to the Rio Grande, and the adobe hideout known only to Miguel Morales and his half-brother, Lari.

Helen Mayfield sagged in saddle. She rode behind Lari, numbed by fear and without hope. The night wind was cold. It reached through her jacket and she shivered.

They had been riding for hours. She had a vague feeling that it must be past midnight. For the first hours there had been some urgency pushing Lari, but now he had slowed his pace, whether because the urgency had lessened or to preserve the winded animals they rode she did not know.

Lari pulled up in the shadow of the sandstone cliffs. He turned and looked at her. "We rest here," he said.

He slid out of saddle and walked to her, a tall, slouching man with a light stride. He reached up for her, but Helen avoided the touch of his hands and slid from saddle on the side away from him.

He laughed gutturally. He drew out a clay pipe and squatted on his heels, lighting up.

Helen walked away from her drooping roan. She found a rock and sagged down on it. She forced her numbed mind to think.

Perhaps she could prevail on this man to let her go? More money?

"Take me back to Gallejo," she said. "I will see that you get more American gold."

Lari didn't even look at her. She lapsed into weary silence. Ahead of her the narrowing gap was dark. It seemed ages since she had left Dallas. She sat stiffly, watching the dark shape of the man pulling on his pipe.

The horses shifted and searched for tough grass tufts along the wall. Their movement seemed to decide something in the Mexican killer. He came to his feet, tapping the dottle out in his calloused palm.

He eyed her for a long time. His hand came up and he brushed his lips with his sleeve.

Helen stood up. It was as though his hand had reached out to stroke her. She felt the pounding of her heart in her throat.

Lari moved toward her. He took his time.

Helen backed away, her terror mounting. Then she turned and ran.

Her skirt hampered her. Lari caught up with her before she had covered thirty yards. She felt his rough hand on her shoulder, twisted away, and the jacket was torn loose from her arm. She staggered and would have fallen, but he caught her, pulling her roughly around.

His face was close, dark, smelling strongly of cheap tobacco. His right hand closed on the nape of her neck, holding her face to his.

Above her sobbing panic she heard the whistles!

Two sharp trilling blasts!

Lari froze. A look of stark terror re-

placed the lust in his expression. He pushed her away from him and turned, his hand on his Colt butt.

Helen Mayfield sank to the ground. There was no strength in her legs.

The strange whistles were not repeated. But Lari was edging toward his horse, his hand on his Colt. He showed every intention of leaving.

HELEN stared after him. Beyond and above Lari, on the sandstone cliff, was a rider. He might have been there for some time, but this was the first time she had seen him.

A dark figure on a black horse. An etching of a model cast from black metal.

Lari saw the rider at the same time. He broke into a run for his horse.

A monstrous shape shuffled out of the gap shadows. He was behind Lari and the Mexican did not see the giant until it was too late!

The enormous figure came out into faint starlight and Helen, catching a full glimpse of that hairy body and small, flat head, uttered one terrified scream before she fainted.

Lari had one hand on the pommel. He never made it into saddle.

A huge hand fell on his shoulder, plucked him away. The other hand closed around his neck. He was lifted high, shaken as a terrier shakes a rat. Then his lifeless body was tossed aside.

The huge figure turned. It shuffled toward the girl lying limp on the ground.

The rider on the cliff blew his whistle. Three sharp blasts.

The creature had been trained to obey that whistle. He bent over the girl, lifted her as easily as though she were a small rag doll. Her arms dangled loosely as he turned, shuffled back into the canyon darkness.

CHAPTER VIII

Rendezvous With Death

IT WAS midnight when the Lone Wolf left Gallejo with the Morales Border bunch. The fiesta of San Pablo was still in full swing. Behind them they left the body of Lupe Valdez, and only Hatfield and Juan O'Brien—known by Morales' killers as Pedro—knew what had happened.

They crossed the Rio Grande before dawn and by sunup were almost ten miles into Mexico.

For most of the day they rode through scorched bare hills and across desolate flatlands. It was a route only Morales knew, and they saw no signs of life on the long ride south.

Before sundown the Border chieftain turned down a small valley to a small grove of cottonwoods shading a shallow stream. There they made camp.

Only Ruiz and the fat José whose torn ear lobe was wrapped under a dirty bandage showed a sullen opposition to Jim Hatfield's presence. The others were indifferent, showing neither warmth nor enmity.

The Mexican Rurale and Hatfield sat together, slightly apart from the others. Juan plucked a stem of grass and chewed on it, his blue eyes seemingly indifferent to what was going on or even to what he was saying. His voice was a low mutter:

"Sometimes the Rurales intercept the shipments, Jim. For this reason it is always a new rendezvous, and a new man who brings the opium."

The Texas Ranger nodded. Nipping the traffic here would not stop it, as long as the man behind Morales remained free. Inside Lost Canyon, he speculated grimly, was the answer to all of it.

It was after dark when the pack train showed up. A dozen shaggy desert burros loaded with twin baskets. Three men with them, riding mules—they looked like

Mexican peasants.

The leader, a small narrow-chested man, came over to the small campfire. His bright, alert eyes missed little.

Juan was bending over the coffee pot when the man came out of the shadows. Hatfield saw the Rurales captain duck his head and spill coffee into the fire. Juan cursed and walked away into the flickering shadows.

A TALL TEXAS TALE

BABY BEDBUGS

SOME boys in Kansas City were showing a Texas rancher the sights of the town. "What do you think of our stockyards?" asked one of the Kansas City boys.

"Oh, they're all right, but we have branding corrals in Texas that are bigger," he said.

That night they put some snapping turtles in his bed. When he turned back the covers he asked what they were.

"Missouri Bedbugs," they replied.

He peered at them for a moment. "So they are," the Texan agreed. "They're such young 'uns I didn't recognize 'em right off."

—James Scales

"Jake Pietras!" Juan murmured as he squatted beside the Ranger. He was tense, waiting, and Hatfield catching the edge of his mood, became alert also.

The small man shook hands with Morales and squatted by the fire. He sipped his coffee and talked for a few minutes with Miguel. When he had finished his coffee he stood up. Miguel reached in his shirt and unfastened a money-belt which he handed to Jake Pietras. The man hefted it, smiled, and stuffed it into his shirt. Morales followed him into the shadows and watched him climb aboard his mule. Jake's two companions had not dismounted.

Morales waved in parting and stood in the outer shadows until Jake and his two men had disappeared in the night. Then he walked over to the laden burros and ran his hand down into the corn, to the small brown opium packets underneath.

Jake knew better than to doublecross him, he thought bleakly. Without hurry then he turned, came back to the fire.

"Let's ride!"

Jim Hatfield and Juan came to their feet. Juan's voice was relieved. "For a moment, Jim, I thought—"

"Wade!"

Miguel's voice cut through the shadows, halting them. The Ranger turned. He saw the Colt in Miguel's hand and knew that Juan's relief had been premature.

"Did you know Jake?" Miguel demanded.

The Ranger tensed. "No."

Morales smiled coldly. "You never met Jake Pietras," he said softly. "Yet you know Juan O'Brien, Captain of the Mexican Rurales!"

Juan was standing beside his cayuse, with Ruiz close behind him. He whirled at Morales' words, made a break for his gun.

RUIZ seemed to have been anticipating such a move. He had his fingers on the butt of his own Colt which he drew and chopped down with it in a savage cut across Juan's head. Juan pitched forward on his face. Ruiz kicked him in the ribs and spat into the dust.

"I smelled something wrong about him and his amigo, Miguel!" He was moving toward the Ranger now, his Colt leveled, the hammer clicking back under his thumb.

"Put that gun away!" Morales snapped. "I'll give the orders here, Ruiz!"

The scarred man hesitated, his eyes glittering with a murderous hate. Tragedy hinged by a hair and the men gathered

in the flickering shadows knew it. Slowly Ruiz eased the hammer down; he cursed harshly as he thrust the weapon into holster.

Morales licked his lips. "Your gunbelts, Wade!" he ordered. "Drop them!"

Hatfield had no alternative. He looked at Juan's sprawled figure. He and Juan had taken a long chance and it had backfired. Backfired because the man who had come to the rendezvous with the opium had recognized the Rurales captain.

It was still apparent that Miguel did not know Juan's friend was Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger. But the disclosure that he was a friend of the Mexican O'Brien was only slightly less damaging.

"Ruiz! Take his gun belts!" Miguel was sneering. "El Zopilote will be glad to see them both."

They reached the Rio Grande before dawn. The moon had gone from the sky, making the darkness seem blacker over the humped land.

The Lone Wolf rode slack in Goldy's saddle, his hands bound behind him. From the time they had left the rendezvous spot his mind had been working, sorting out the thin threads of hope.

Juan rode alongside, his blunt face shadowed, his shoulders slumped in resignation. They had gambled and lost—and in Juan's mind there was little doubt that neither he nor the Lone Wolf would leave Lost Canyon, unless it was the way Arch Darren had left it.

But if Juan O'Brien's thinking was that of a gambler who had bluffed on a pat hand and lost; that of the Lone Wolf was that of a man with a joker up his sleeve.

There was a slim chance, as he saw it, and it involved hitting the Rio Grande close to where they had crossed it. A long and desperate chance, with everything to gain, and nothing to lose.

They did. They came to the river at the bluffs and turned east along the ridge, heading for the fording a mile beyond. It was starlight dark and desert quiet and only the creak of saddle leather and jingle of bit irons broke the stillness.

Below the bluffs, some thirty feet down, the Rio Grande slid smoothly, bending ahead to make its wide sweep south.

Jim Hatfield rode as slackly as ever. What happened next depended on Goldy, and the big stallion had been trained like a quarter horse to move at the pressure of his rider's knees.

The transition from slouched prisoner to man of action was instantaneous. His knee pressed sharply against Goldy's flank, the Ranger's heels raked the sorrel, his voice bursting sharply in command:

"Go, Goldy!"

The sorrel leaped out of the group of riders like a startled deer. He turned for the bluff and was at the edge before the bunched riders realized what had happened.

Ruiz jerked his rifle free and levered a bullet in place as he brought the weapon up. In the breath of time before he squeezed trigger Juan edged his cayuse into the side of Ruiz' mount. The carbine exploded sharply in the night—and then stallion and Ranger disappeared over the bluff.

Ruiz swung around in frustrated rage, smashing the carbine into Juan O'Brien's face. The Rurales captain, knocked off his horse, lay limp in the dust.

Miguel Morales spurred to the bluff edge and looked down into the river. The shadows were ink blots under him. In midstream the reflection of the stars danced in the current.

Ruiz pulled up beside him and swore angrily. "I should have killed him back there!" he snarled.

MIGUEL judged the remaining hours of darkness. It was essential that they be in Lost Canyon before daylight. Those were El Zopilote's orders, and the Black Buzzard did not take kindly to men who disobeyed them.

"Make sure of him, Ruiz!" he ordered grimly. "Find him—or his body!"

The scarred man nodded. "I'll find him. . . ."

The Lone Wolf was jarred from saddle when he and Goldy hit the water. He felt the current take hold of him, swirling

him around, pull him toward the bend ahead. He kicked violently, felt his head break surface, and gulped in a lungful of air before he went under again.

He fought the drag of the river. During one of the moments he was on the surface he glimpsed Goldy, a dark shape ahead of him, swimming strongly. Then he slammed against a jut of rock and the current momentarily pinned him against it.

The Ranger curled himself around the rock, his boots encountering an underwater shelf. He fought the current, struggling to keep his precarious position on the shelf. Pushing his head above water he rested, gasping, his side bruised and aching.

He was close under the bluff overhang here and the heavy shadow hid him from view of anyone above. In the interval he rested he heard the slow gait of a horse overhead. Someone was searching the river for him.

With his hands tied, the Lone Wolf's position was precarious. The current surged against him, threatening to pull him away from the ledge. He fought to keep his balance while he shifted position, got his back to the rock jutting a few feet above water.

With his fingers he felt along the submerged angles of the rock, finding a jagged corner. He hunched down so his bound wrists could work against it. The current lapped water into his mouth and nose.

He worked desperately, alternately pushing up to keep from drowning. Time passed in a slow, murmuring wheel of darkness. He was resting when he heard the rider on the other side of the river.

The Ranger slid down into the water then until only his nose and eyes were above it. He saw the dark rider pause on the opposite bluff and recognized Ruiz hunched over the saddle.

Ruiz seemed to be studying the water under the overhang with a hawk's eye for prey.

Hatfield's arm and shoulder muscles knotted in desperate effort. The long and merciless rubbing of his wrists and bonds against the jagged rock had frayed the rope to a weak point. He felt the bonds part and his hands came free just as he lost his balance on the ledge. He had to draw in a deep breath before he sank and let the current take him.

When he came up he was floating around the bend. Further down, the river widened and became shallower. The ford was at this point. He started to swim downstream, keeping close to the shore from which he had entered the river.

Coming up to the shallowing water he saw movement across the river, recognized Goldy moving in a willow thicket. The big stallion had gone ashore at the ford. But he seemed to sense that the Ranger was still in the water, for he came away from the willows to stand on the bank, ears pricked alertly forward.

Jim Hatfield bucked the lessening current toward the sorrel. The stallion saw him and whickered eagerly before his rider's familiar sharp whisper quieted him.

FROM the bluff which sloped down to the ford came the quick pound of a rider. Ruiz had heard Goldy's greeting and was coming to investigate!

Hatfield swam swiftly for the shore. He drifted under the cutbank in two feet of water just as Goldy wheeled away from the oncoming rider.

Ruiz ignored the sorrel. He walked his cayuse into the river, a scarred and eager killer hunched forward, his carbine held lightly across his pommel.

He was within six feet of the Ranger when the Lone Wolf came up out of the water. The unexpected appearance startled Ruiz's cayuse which lunged sideward, splashing water.

Ruiz jerked around and fired, his bullet kicking up a tiny geyser upstream. The Rangers hands were on him then, pulling him down. Ruiz splashed into three feet of water and Hatfield fell on top of him.

There was a brief, violent struggle during which Ruiz never gained the surface. When Hatfield straightened and lurched

for the bank, the killer's body, caught by the slow current, surfaced once, rolled and disappeared again, heading downstream.

Hatfield turned to Ruiz' cayuse but the animal eluded him and splashed ashore. Hatfield's gun-belts were hanging from the saddle-horn.

He came up to the bank and whistled for Goldy and when the stallion came up he mounted and ran down Ruiz' mount which seemed docile enough when pursued by a man on horseback. Retrieving his guns and belts the Ranger buckled them about his flat, muscled waist. Then he stripped Ruiz' horse of saddle and harness and turned him loose.

He searched the dark skyline then, pulling back into focus remembered details of Lupe's rice-powder sketch. Somewhere ahead was Lost Canyon—and the end of a long trail.

CHAPTER IX

"Kill!"

THE SURE-FOOTED burros moved slowly, followed by Morales' riders, as the opium train moved down into the canyon along the narrow, switchback trail.

Juan O'Brien, his face swollen from Ruiz' blow, rode slack in saddle, wondering if the Lone Wolf had lived through the jump into the river.

Morales looked back once. He was thinking of Ruiz. In the east was a grayness now, paling the stars.

Worry made its way in him. Ruiz should have caught up with them. In another hour it would be dawn.

He let his hand slide down over his saddle-bag and the feel of the $20,000 in gold gave him a needed lift. No one except Lari knew of this. And Lari would be waiting, with the Mayfield girl, at the hideout beyond the Davis River junction.

This was his last run into Mexico for El Zopilote, Morales decided. It was getting too risky. And the money in his saddle bags, plus the cut he had coming, would keep him a long time.

He turned his cayuse and sent it down the trail after the others, to the canyon ledge below which the Davis River, cutting through limestone cliffs, made its dark and noiseless passage.

Fifteen minutes later they came to the turning of the Hammer!

A dark, motionless figure waited at the bend— a tall man made taller by the night and the legends. A mahogany-faced man with a gray-black beard growing to a trimmed point at his chin. Black hair under his black hat. And a silver whistle dangling from a sliver chain around his neck.

Morales halted the train and rode on ahead.

"We ran into trouble," he explained. "One of my men turned out to be Juan O'Brien, captain in the Mexican Rurales. I have him with us, to do with as you please."

El Zopilote Negro listened. His eyes seemed far away and yet murderously cold on Miguel. The Border boss shifted nervously.

"He fooled me," he admitted bleakly. "Talked me into taking a friend of his along to the rendezvous in Mexico." He licked his lips at the grim silence of the man in black.

"Jake Pietras recognized O'Brien," he added. "We took him prisoner. He's had no opportunity to get information to the *policia*—and besides, we are now across the Texas border, out of the jurisdiction of Mexico."

"But not out of the reach of the law of Texas!" El Zopilote's tone was flat in the night. "Where is this friend of Juan O'Brien's? Who is he?"

Miquel squirmed uncomfortably. "He's the tall gringo I mentioned before. The one I saw talking with that American doctor, Kerstin, in Gallejo."

El Zopilote started, as Morales hurried on:

"Juan O'Brien made me believe he was an outlaw named Jim Wade. Quite

possibly, he's a lawman. But he is dead. He went into the Rio Grande with his hands tied. Ruiz remained behind to make sure he didn't come out."

"And where is Ruiz?"

Miguel shrugged. "He will be along soon."

El Zopilote was silent. Finally he made a short gesture of dismissal.

"You know, I'm beginning to think we're lost"

"Send your men back to Gallejo. Here!" He tossed Miguel a small purse. "Divide this among them. They can celebrate the fiesta."

He waited until the men had turned away, leaving only the burros, and Juan with Miguel. "Come," he said softly. "I have something to show you, Miguel."

Beyond the great hammer-shaped rock the canyon trail continued for more than a half-mile. Then the ledge petered out against a wall of rock through which the river fell a hundred feet into the canyon.

AHEAD the way was walled off, but to the left opened a gash in the tableland which towered above them. El Zopilote turned here.

Away from the falls the canyon widened, like the neck of a bottle. It ended a quarter of a mile further on against the limestone cliffs.

The sky in the east was beginning to lighten, but the darkness in the canyon was black and the silence a million years old. Against the pale cliffs was a scene Morales had seen before, and as before it raised the hackles on his neck.

A dead city seemed to hang from the cliff face, a series of square-walled cubicles seemingly set one atop the other, reaching to within fifty feet of the rim.

A dead city, its builders long since van-

ished. No sound came from it. But at the base of the cliff, close to one of the bottom dwellings, a campfire made a tiny glow.

El Zopilote halted beside the fire. A deaf-mute arose and stood silent, a rifle held casually.

The arrival of the pack train brought a shambling, huge figure out of a nearby dwelling. He squeezed through the doorway like a St. Bernard coming out of its kennel. A chain clanked in the early morning stillness.

The giant stood watching them, three hundred and seventy-five pounds of brutish muscles and dim intelligence. The end of the eight-foot chain was padlocked to an iron eye driven deep in rock.

Miguel's hands tightened on his reins, though he had seen Moro before. Behind him Juan O'Brien stared.

El Zopilote made some sign to the deaf mute who turned and shuffled away. He disappeared into another cubicle and backed out shortly, dragging a girl toward the fire. A gray-thatched, spare man followed them.

Miguel's breath came harsh in his throat.

"I do not like men who doublecross me!" El Zopilote's voice was like the cut of a whip across the fire. "Men who ride too tall in their saddles!"

Morales licked his lips. In the flamelight his cruel features stretched taut. His eyes had the glitter of a trapped animal.

"Your cut was not enough, I see, Miquel. You wanted more. And you and Lari saw a way to get more. The man I was holding as hostage. You got him to write a note to his daughter. For twenty thousand dollars you and Lari would have freed him—and risked all our necks!"

"No!" Miguel's voice was vehement "I never intended to turn Mayfield loose. I—"

Instantly he saw he was talking too much and to no avail. He saw El Zopilote's hand came up with a Colt, and he jabbed spurs deep into his white stallion, his fingers closing around his own weapon.

El Zopilote's Colt flared, the concussion reaching out and bouncing back from the brooding cliffs.

Miguel, knocked out of saddle, fell in a sprawl and tried to get up, moving instinctively. The next shot dropped his face into the dirt and stilled him.

Beyond the fire Moro lunged against his chain.

Helen Mayfield and her father stood together, just within the firelight. To one side Juan O'Brien sat in the saddle of a horse too tired to be skittish of the shots.

El Zopilote rode to Morales' white stallion, caught it by the bit reins, steadied it. Reaching over, he unfastened Miguel's saddle-bags. Their weight brought a sneer across his thin, dark, precise features.

He backed his cayuse around and made a motion to the deaf mute.

"Cut that one loose, Felipe!"

THE man came trotting up to Juan, like some small dog. He reached up and pulled the captain out of saddle. Juan fell on his side and the Mexican knelt on his back, jamming the captain's face into the dirt. He drew his sheath knife and cut the rope around Juan's wrists, then stepped back, picking up his rifle where he had set it. His face turned to question his master.

Juan got slowly to his feet, began massaging his wrists.

El Zopilote faced the man and girl by the fire.

"I kept you as hostage," he told them, "for a need that has not arisen. It is not of my choosing that your daughter is here, Mayfield. But I'm sure you can understand why I cannot turn her loose."

Henry Mayfield's voice was bitter. "What harm can she do?"

El Zopilote laughed. "The harm a woman can do is incalculable. Much as it will distress me to see it, I will have to turn you both over to Moro."

In the flickering shadows against the near dwelling the giant stood like some ancient troglodyte.

"A curious specimen, Mayfield," El Zopilote said. "I found him wandering in the

hills, half-starved. I took care of him, trained him. Like some big dog. I am the only man he will obey. The only man who can get near those enormous hands and live."

He dismounted, his teeth showing in a strange smile—he seemed to enjoy giving his lecture.

"Your friend, the good Dr. Kerstin would indeed be interested in Moro. Both clinically and anthropologically."

Helen Mayfield's face was twisted with horror. "You talk like a—a civilized man, Señor Zopilote. But Buzzard is an apt description of you. Only a savage beast would be inhuman enough to turn that—that monster loose. An utterly cruel—"

"Not cruelty, Miss Mayfield," the bandit leader interrupted dryly, "but expediency. Or perhaps they are the same." He shrugged. "Tonight I'm burning my bridges. Tomorrow El Zopilote will be only another legend to add to the many of the Los Perdidos—"

"You forget my friend," Juan O'Brien muttered. "He is the Ranger they call the Lone Wolf. He is the one bridge you have not yet burned behind you."

"He is dead," the bandit leader snapped. "Miguel said so. Ruiz made sure he was dead!"

Juan's lips held a defiant twist. "Ruiz has not appeared," he murmured in reminder.

El Zopilote's eyes flashed. "After tonight there will be no El Zopilote for the Lone Wolf to find. Should he be fool enough to try!"

He turned to Moro. The giant stood quiet, a dumb animal waiting.

Felipe shuffled closer to the fire, fondling his rifle.

The dark-clothed bandit leader was like a pigmy at Moro's feet as he knelt and unlocked the padlock which held the chain to the iron stake. He stepped back.

Juan had edged backward toward the Mayfields. He had nothing but his hands and he knew they were not enough.

El Zopilote pointed. "*Kill!*" he said.

Moro made a sound like an eager whine deep in his throat. Dragging his chain he moved toward the small group beyond the fire.

CHAPTER X

"I Knew You'd Come!"

THE JINGLE of harness warned the Lone Wolf. He was up on the rim of the canyon, trying to find the trail down. In the early morning pre-dawn light Lupe's landmarks were difficult to judge.

Now he pulled Goldy aside, merging into deeper shadows, as a voice cursed his slipping horse. Another voice rode over the cursing.

"Better to risk our necks on this goat trail than to linger behind in that devil's canyon. Ayee . . . I have chills every time I come here."

A rider topped the rim and pulled aside to wait for his companions. "A good drunk in the cantina," he growled, will not be enough this time. The money is good, amigos, but I for one have had enough of business like this to get it."

The others bunched up around him. One of them said harshly: "It is El Zopilote who gives me the shivers. Better he should be called El Diablo Negro."

They moved away, merging into the grayness. Hatfield waited until the sound of their passage had faded, then turned Goldy toward the rim.

The men who had just passed could be picked up in Gallejo. But Miguel had not been with them, nor had Juan O'Brien. The Mexican captain could well be dead by now.

Goldy took the steep trail like a mountain goat. Hatfield turned him left. The gloom in the canyon was lightening to the spread of daylight in the east.

He came to the great rock over the bend in the canyon trail; the rock which resembled a hammer. He recalled Lupe's whispered warning, "Beyond the turning of the Hammer—"

Hatfield eyed the trail, wondering if

this was where Arch had been killed; wondering, too, what was beyond that rock that was capable of crushing a man as Darren had been crushed.

The smile that touched his lips was as bleak as rim ice.

He rode beyond the turning and came to the fall. It was while he was undecided that he heard the first gunshot bounce its echoes along the canyon wall to his left.

He turned Goldy into it, the second shot adding urgency in him. When he came in sight of the small campfire and the incredible cliff city, Moro was advancing on Juan O'Brien and the Mayfields.

Fifteen feet from the two men and the girl, Moro heard the oncoming rider, and paused. El Zopiloto heard him, also; he whirled to face the tall, broad-shouldered rider materializing out of the darkness. He drew and fired one quick shot and lunged violently aside, barely escaping the slug that sighed past his cheek.

He ducked behind his horse, and, using its bulk as a shield, darted for the narrow trail that led up to the second tier of cubicles.

Hatfield had a glimpse of him then, but the deaf-mute was using his rifle and the Ranger's attention riveted on the man as the second slug burned across his left arm.

He had drawn his rifle at the beginning of Goldy's run and now fired from his waist. The deaf-mute spun around and stumbled into Goldy's path. The stallion's heavy shoulder sent him spinning like a stuffed doll.

Moro was undecided. In his dim brain still echoed the order: *"Kill!"* The order had been directed to the three in front of him. He moved toward them, ignoring the rider.

The Lone Wolf rode Goldy almost on top of the giant. Standing erect in his stirrups, Hatfield swung his rifle in a savage smash for that bullet head which reared as high as his own. The gun stock splintered in his hands.

MORO went to his knees. Jim Hatfield took no pity on him. He dropped the useless rifle, drew his right hand Colt and emptied it into that huge, dazed figure.

The brutal impact of lead sent a shudder through that giant frame. Moro jerked and pawed at each tearing slug. Incredibly he stumbled to his feet.

Hatfield's left-hand Colt took up the argument. The Colossus reeled away, whimpering, the pain finally reaching that undersized brain. He turned away from the crashing roar of the Ranger's gun, stumbled, fell. A quiver went through the huge frame, then it was still.

In the graying day Helen Mayfield buried her face in her father's shoulder.

Juan looked up as the Ranger dismounted. "The one bridge El Zopilote couldn't burn," he muttered. He held out his hand. "You couldn't have come at a better time, Jim."

Jim Hatfield cast a brief look at the huge bulk on the ground.

Juan said, "Diablo, what a monster, eh?"

Hatfield nodded. He was reloading his Colts, his attention turning to the ancient city piled up against the cliff face in narrow step fashion.

"El Zopilote," he muttered. "He's holed up in there somewhere." Juan, get back out of range with the Mayfields. I'm going in after him."

He found the narrow path the bandit chief had taken up to the second level, followed it and paused beside a small black hole in the building block barring further passage. He crouched beside it, listening. Somewhere above him he heard pebbles slide.

Lips tight, Hatfield crawled inside, his skin crawling as he half expected a burst of gunfire in his face. He found himself in a bare room vaguely outlined by light which seeped in through a hole in the roof by the far wall. His eyes finally made out an old pole ladder against that wall, providing access to the roof.

In the next twenty minutes of cautious climbing, he made his way up to the topmost level of this fantastic community, built like a honey-comb, each room giving

access to the one above it.

Cubicle by cubicle Jim Hatfield went through that ancient Indian settlement until the last opening brought him out two hundred feet above the canyon floor.

El Zopilote had not holed up after all!

He looked down at the tiny figures of Juan and the Mayfields. The light was all across the sky now, but the eastern hills still blotted out the sun.

Above him the canyon rim was less than fifty feet of sheer limestone. But to the Ranger, at that moment, it could have been fifty miles.

Where had El Zopilote gone?

He turned to the cliff face, searched along it. Close to the edge of the building roof a gnarled oak had rooted into the cliff. Only the little trickle of earth still gathering under it gave the clue—the cave opening was that well hidden.

It was shielded by the twisted branches —a small, narrow passageway leading into the cliff, and upward.

Colt in hand, the Lone Wolf crawled into it.

Five minutes later he emerged on the rim, between two huge boulders that hid the crevice from all but knowing eyes. He came out in time to hear the pound of hooves, to catch a glimpse of El Zopilote and his black horse just before they dipped out of sight in a break in the tableland.

Slowly Hatfield holstered his Colt. El Zopilote was getting away. But the Ranger was in no hurry. He had an idea he knew where to look for the man now.

He went back down into the canyon for Juan O'Brien and the Mayfields. . . . .

THE LONE WOLF parted from them at the outskirts of Gallejo. It had taken most of the day to ride back along the river canyon trail and make the wide loop around the shouldering peaks.

He was tired, and hunger had retreated to gnawing discomfort; but the driving urgency in him pushed him past the borders of sleep.

What he had to do couldn't wait.

He took the mesa trail and at sundown rode through the gate of Dr. Kerstin's house.

An old servant greeted him and took Goldy to the barn when Jim Hatfield dismounted. The Lone Wolf followed him, moving along the stalls until he found the buckskin Kerstin rode.

He caught up the animal's left hind foot and examined the shoe in the fading light.

The old Mexican stared in astonishment.

Hatfield grunted. He came out of the stall and looked toward the house.

"Dr. Kerstin home?"

The Mexican nodded. "He returned early from his trip to Bonnet. He went for medicine for Professor Vanelli who lies in the bedroom in the east wing. I think *el padrone* is with him now."

He was wrong.

Dr. Alan Kerstin was just coming through the archway from the "relic" room when the big Ranger crossed the living room. He stopped; his slim figure sagged; his eyes seemed tired behind his glasses.

Hatfield faced him.

"I knew you'd come," Kerstin said. His voice was flat. "I didn't expect you this soon—but I knew you'd come. Eventually."

Hatfield nodded. He was thinking of Arch with a broken neck, of other innocent victims before Arch.

His voice held no sympathy. "You'll hang, Doc. You know that?"

The slim figure shrugged. "It was worth the price." He laughed. "Some dark stain, black dye, a beard bought in any actor's kit. And Moro. Too bad about Moro. He was the only one I ever was really sure about." He made an "all finished" gesture with his hands. "How did you know, Jim?"

"I recognized the buckskin you rode away from the canyon rim," the Ranger told him. "I checked the tracks. The rest of it fitted. You had known why Helen Mayfield had come to Gallejo—only you and I and the men who kidnaped her

knew about it. Yet, according to Juan, El Zopilote killed Miguel Morales for doublecrossing him. El Zopilote knew about the twenty thousand dollars—he and Moro intercepted the man who was taking Helen into Mexico. It all fitted, Doctor. It had to be you."

Kerstin's smile lingered. It was getting dim in the big room, for the lamps had not yet been lighted.

"I underestimated you, Jim. I always thought your reputation was overblown." He made a motion to the room behind him. "A half million in opium. Screened by this. As a retired doctor puttering around the hills looking for Indian relics, I was pretty safe. The cases I sent off to St. Louis, ostensibly to the museum warehouse contained opium packets. And Professor Vanelli—"

"Is the payoff man!" The voice that spoke was to the right, sharp and biting. "This one I will pay in bullets."

Jim Hatfield's reflexes were somewhat slow. He whirled and drew, but Vanelli's gun barked a split second before his did. He felt the shock across his side, spoiling his first shot at the man leaning weakly in the bedroom doorway.

His second took the fight out of Vanelli who seemed to wilt.

KERSTIN turned and made a break across the big relic room. Hatfield took three strides after him and found his head spinning. He felt strangely weak.

He leaned against the archway and lifted his Colt as Kerstin, reaching a gun rack, yanked a shotgun down and turned to face him.

He must have kept it loaded for emergencies. It went off an instant after the Lone Wolf's slug made a mess of his face. Buckshot peppered the ceiling.

But from where he stood Jim Hatfield knew that El Zopilote had played his last hand. . . .

Three days later the stage pulled out of Gallejo. Henry Mayfield and his daughter, Helen, were passengers.

Jim Hatfield, mounted on Goldy, rode alongside.

He had shaken hands with Juan O'Brien the day before and watched the Rurales Captain leave with his half-dozen prisoners who were wanted more on the Mexican side of the Border than in Texas. The opium, too, would be turned over to the Mexican government.

He looked back once on the town fading behind him. Arch was back there—and Lupe Valdez.

He rubbed his bandaged side and the thought came to him that it might have been he Juan Pelote would find wedged against the river rocks. He thrust the thought aside.

Ahead of him the trail wound like a dull brown ribbon in the beat of the Border sun.

Ahead of him lay the dark and troubled trails of Texas.

Pushing back the window curtains, Helen Mayfield watched that broad-shouldered rider on the golden stallion. Finally she leaned back against the cushions and smiled at her father.

"Somehow, just seeing him riding out there makes me feel much safer," she said.

FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

TOWN OF NO RETURN

Another Fast-Shooting, Hard-Riding Jim Hatfield Novel

By JACKSON COLE

PLUS OTHER ACTION NOVELETS, SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES

He lined the barrel of his gun on Ocker's thin chest and dropped the hammer

The Foot-Loose Kid

The nester girl was so pretty Johnny almost forgot why he'd come—to run her off the range

By PHILIP MORGAN

JOHNNY DELANCEY was six feet two inches tall and he weighed a hard two hundred and ten pounds. He was red-headed and wild and reckless, living only for a bottle and a girl, between the hard months of punching cows. Johnny had never done any serious thinking in his twenty-two years and he had no intention of doing any in the fore-

seeable future. He was happy. He had his health, a good riding job and an occasional night in town.

There was trouble in the Bent Fork country and he was aware of it, but he didn't let it worry him. It was the concern of his boss, Ed Chambers, and none of Johnny's. But he had a hunch as he rode up to the main house now that it was about to become his concern. The thought didn't please him.

Chambers was on the porch, in the big rocking chair, when Johnny rode up and sat slack in the saddle, waiting for orders. Chambers looked Johnny over shrewdly and carefully and liked what he saw. He grinned, but somehow without warmth. He was a little man, fifty or so, quick and hard-tempered and close with a dollar. Johnny didn't like him too well.

Chambers said, "I've got a job for you, DeLancey. A nester has moved in and fenced Flathead Springs. I want you to get over there and run him out. Pull down the fences and burn his shack and get rid of him once and for all. One look at you and he'll run all the way back to Iowa."

"I was hired to ride," Johnny said easily. "That's all I figure to do, Mr. Chambers. You want fighters, hire some." He said it flatly, because Johnny DeLancey always spoke his mind. He liked the job, but there were other jobs and he could always get one of them.

CHAMBERS flushed slightly and his tone changed. He spoke convincingly then.

"I know you weren't hired for this sort of thing, but it has to be done. I figured if I could send you, your size would scare them out. That way there'll be no bloodshed. If you don't go, I'll just send someone else and maybe there's a fight and somebody gets hurt. You could save all that."

Johnny thought about it for awhile. What Chambers said was true enough. If he sent Ned Ocker, for instance, the nester would end up getting shot. Ocker was handy with his gun and he liked using it. Johnny didn't really mind running the nester off, because that spring did belong to the Spur Ranch and had ever since Old Man Bill Chambers had taken this land from the Sioux back in the Seventies. Johnny didn't like barbed wire, either, and nesters meant barbed wire. He could probably do it like Chambers said, probably his size could scare them off.

He said, "I'll go have a look."

Chambers came up out of his chair, smiling broadly. "That's the stuff, Johnny. I knew you'd do it. We got to stick together, us people running beef."

Johnny shook his head. "It's a stalling game, Mr. Chambers, and won't get you nowhere. The nesters will get what they want. You can hold 'em off for awhile, but not for long."

Chambers face turned brick-red and he slammed his fist down on the porch railing. "As long as I'm alive, no nester will settle on Spur grass! Now get down there and run them off the spring."

Johnny shrugged, wheeled his horse and rode from the yard. The pleasure was gone from the day.

The Flathead Springs welled up in a small green valley that appeared suddenly in the vast sea of sage. Johnny DeLancey came over the ridge and dropped down toward the springs and the small sod shanty that sat there now.

He caught the sparkle of sunlight on new barbed wire and his lips curled back off his teeth in a quick disgust. What that stuff did to cows wasn't pretty! Or to riders caught in it at night. Johnny had no use for the men who used it, who were crawling over the open range and plowing it up and ruining a fine land. On the other hand, he had no real quarrel with them, since the only thing he owned was his saddle, his horse, the clothes and gun he wore and the few knick-knacks in his war bag. But Flathead Springs was important to the Spur and he owed the Spur his loyalty. So he would move the nester off the springs.

Johnny opened a gate without getting down and rode into the nester's yard. He

had ridden across forty acres of newly plowed ground that was ready to be planted to winter wheat, and he marveled at the even rows. Someone here knew how to handle a walking plow. He drew rein in front of the shanty, yelled, "Hello, in there!" and waited for someone to come out. He knew what he would see in the eyes of whoever showed—the fear and the despair and the lightly held defiance. He tried not to think of it.

The door to the shanty opened quickly, and a young woman came out. She was the tallest girl Johnny had seen in a long time—full-bodied and strong; not one of the dance hall type. Her pretty blonde hair was tied severely back from her face. She was pretty enough, but in her face was a strength that made a man forget beauty. Her blue eyes were sparkling now with quick fire.

"What do you want?" she demanded, and there was neither fear about her nor defiance. Anger, but not defiance. "I suppose you came to tell us to get off. They told us in town we were on Spur range and that we'd be run off."

Johnny was slightly dazed. For several moments he just stared, until he saw a faint red creep into the girl's face. He straightened then, and coughed.

"I want to talk to your dad," he said.

SHE told him, without emotion, "My father is dead. I'm farming here with my mother and brother."

"Let's see the brother," Johnny said, but he kept staring at the girl.

He had never seen a woman like her. She was pretty, yet she was big, big enough even for him. And beneath her cold exterior, he thought he read warmth and humor and kindness. Just sitting there, he knew he wanted her. And at the same time, he knew he could never have her. For the first time in his life, Johnny DeLancey regretted not owning anything. He had nothing to offer a wife.

The girl said coolly, "Ted—my brother—is six. Do you still want to talk to him?" The color heightened in her face. "Do you have to stare at me?"

Johnny grinned and removed his hat, something he had forgotten to do. "I'm sorry, ma'am. It's just that you're uncommon pretty."

The girl didn't like him, because he represented everything she had to fear, yet her hand rose in a woman's unconscious gesture, touching her hair, smoothing it. She gave a quick glance down at her plain gingham dress that had been made when she was younger and now clung too close to her full body. She recovered her composure quickly and said:

"You didn't come here to pass out compliments. What do you want?"

"The boss sent me over to run you off," Johnny said easily, still smiling. "You reckon you'd like to move?"

"I reckon not," she said sarcastically, mocking his voice.

"That's kind of the way I had it figured," Johnny admitted.

"Well," she said defiantly, "why don't you pull your gun and shoot me? That's what cowmen do to nesters, isn't it?"

Johnny nodded gravely. He reached down and brought up his .45 in one smooth motion, pulling the hammer back. He was careful to keep the gun pointed high, but the girl gasped and the color left her face. Johnny laughed and dropped the gun back in his holster.

"Ma'am, that was just an object lesson. Don't go judging the whole herd by a few mavericks. I never used a gun on anyone in my life." He admitted truthfully, "I've never had to."

At this moment, a boy burst out of the soddy and ran to stand beside the girl. A woman followed, trying to stop him, but he eluded her and clutched his sister's dress, staring at Johnny in open admiration.

"You're a real cowboy, ain't you, mister!"

Johnny had been looking for an excuse and now he had it. He swung down from the horse and walked forward, smiling his friendliest smile.

"I sure am, pardner," he told the boy. "If you behave yourself, I'll let you ride my horse."

The woman behind him said. "I tried to stop him, Nancy."

"It's all right, Mom," the girl said wearily, and Johnny saw that she really was frightened and regretted scaring her. He admired her courage and the way she had faced him without flinching or begging.

He bowed slightly to the woman who had been called, 'Mom,' and said, "Johnny DeLancey, ma'am. You and your family got no worries from me."

"Ain't you going to shoot us?" the boy asked, his eyes wide.

"Not today," Johnny told him.

The woman said, "I'm Mrs. John Trent, and this is my daughter, Nancy, and my son Ted. We're new here and we've been told to expect trouble. That's why we're so inhospitable. Please forgive us, Mr. DeLancey."

"Johnny will do, ma'am," he said, and smiled at Nancy. "I liked your daughter's spunk."

"She's been the head of the family, I'm afraid," Mrs. Trent said. "She's had to do all the work of farming. It's been hard for her."

Nancy said, still eyeing Johnny with suspicion, "He came to run us off, Mom. This may be a trick."

Johnny said hotly, "I'm not tricky, miss! If I run somebody off something, there'll be no doubt in their mind about what's happening. And I'm not running you off here. You've got no claim here, and you ought to leave, but I'm not forcing you to."

"It's Government land," the girl said. "We filed for it, and have legal title."

"Just the same, it's Spur land. Old Man Chambers took this land away from the Sioux and held it. He buried his wife here, and they buried him here, too. It's rightfully his land—or belongs to his rightful heirs. But that's not for you and me to argue over."

"Let me show you," Nancy Trent said. "Let me show you what we've done. This is farm land, not cattle land. Your present Mr. Chambers has thousands of acres. He doesn't need this."

She walked off, and Johnny tagged along, his eyes feasting on her strong form. She was as crazy as all the rest of the nesters, but he was willing to listen, as long as he could watch her. She took him over the farm, showing him the rich black earth, the topsoil that went down three feet, the water that could be run into the rows from the springs to irrigate. She stood on the little crest behind the house and swept her hand in a circle, pointing down the small valley.

"That's farm land. All of it. There's three hundred and sixty acres of good level land for planting, and another almost three hundred acres on which to run a few head of cattle. It isn't right for it to be used as part of open range. It's too good land for that."

They were quite a ways up from the house now, and Nancy's mother and brother were not in sight. Johnny put both his hands on Nancy's shoulders and drew her to him. He saw her eyes get wider and wider in surprise and waited for her to pull angrily away. But she didn't. She came full against him and when his lips sought hers, they were waiting for him, soft and moist and warm. He kissed her hungrily, but tenderly, and stepped back. She raised her fingers to her lips, smiling enigmatically.

"That was nice, Johnny," she murmured.

He said angrily, "Do you let every man you've known for an hour kiss you?"

She kept on smiling, but shook her head, "Not all, Johnny. You're the first I ever kissed. There hasn't been time. Maybe if I had more time—"

"That's not right!" he shouted. "You ought to be careful who you kiss."

She laughed at him, then sobered. "I was fooling, Johnny. I just wanted you to kiss me. I never wanted any man to before." She moved in closer to him and looked up. "Besides, I don't often see a man taller than I am. You just overpowered me, Johnny DeLancey."

He felt himself getting hot under the collar at her nearness, at what he saw in her eyes. He felt like running, only his feet wouldn't track. He stood rooted a

moment, then with a groan, he drew her into his arms and kissed her again. This time he kissed her hard, bruising her lips. Her arms were around his neck, holding him tight and her body was soft and firm against him. But this time she pulled away, pushing him gently back, but she was breathing quickly.

"That's enough, Johnny. That's enough." He was so shaken it took him a moment to get his emotions in hand. Then she said, "This place needs a man, Johnny. A big, strong man like you."

HE SAW it then. He had almost walked into the trap. One more kiss like that and he would never have escaped the responsibilities he'd been dodging all his life.

"I've got to be riding," he said quickly and headed down the hill for the house.

She ran after him and fell in step, but he was walking too fast for talking. He kept going all the way to his horse and when he had mounted he felt safer. He looked down at her and almost weakened. But then the brother and mother came from the shanty. He said, "So-long," and started to rein around.

"What about my ride?" the kid yelled.

"Stay for supper," Mrs. Trent invited. "It isn't often we get company."

Nancy looked up at him and her lips curled slightly, "Let him go, Mom. He's afraid if he stays he might have to start acting like a man instead of a little boy riding all over the country on his big horse. Let him go."

There was an angry retort on Johnny's lips, but he didn't make it. He put spurs to his mount and went out of there at a run.

Johnny's blood pressure didn't return to normal until he had ridden for two miles. Even then it didn't come all the way down. He kept thinking of what he should have told Nancy—about how punching cows could sometimes make farming look like a Sunday School picnic, or how he could hold down a top riding job on any spread in the West. A lot of things. But gradually he forgot about that and just remembered how she had looked when he had first seen her, proud and unafraid. Ready to fight a man's fight to keep that land. He remembered how she had looked after he had kissed her, all soft and warm and loving. It sobered him and made him mad at the same time, when he thought how he couldn't have her. The old habit of keeping on the move was too strong in him. He couldn't saddle himself with a wife and family. That was not for Johnny DeLancey. Then he remembered the softness of her against him and the heat climbed up the back of his neck, and he wasn't sure of anything.

It was dusk when Johnny rode into the Spur yard. He went right to the bunkhouse and packed his war bag, went out and tied it behind his saddle. He swung up, rode over to the main house, and got down. He walked into the room Chambers used as an office and found the owner there with the foreman, Ned Ocker, a nervous, bitter-faced little man. Both looked up in surprise as he came in. Johnny said, "I come to draw my time Chambers."

"What's the trouble?" Chambers asked, puzzled.

"There's a girl and her mother and kid brother living over there on the springs. I didn't put 'em off."

"Well," Chambers said and scratched his chin with his thumb. "Well, now, that's no cause for quitting, Johnny. Ned here can handle 'em. You just go back to riding."

"I want my time," Johnny said, and felt his temper rising. "I want no part of a woman-fighting outfit."

Chambers flushed, but said nothing. He looked closely at Johnny and saw the anger close to the surface.

Ned Ocker wasn't so quick. He said, "Why don't you just say you was scared to run 'em off, DeLancey? Scared the country might get hard with you over it."

Johnny wheeled on Ocker, anger rising like a cloud in his brain. He felt chill hit him. He stood three feet from Ned Ocker.

He said, "That how you figure, you two-

bit gunman? I fight my own battles anyhow. I don't need to use a gun on a bunch of old men and kids, then sit around and crow about how good I am. You're a big wind-bag, Ocker, and that's all you are."

IT WAS more than enough to trigger the vicious-tempered little foreman. He uttered a short curse and took a quick step backward, reaching for his gun. Johnny jumped forward, caught him and pulled him against his chest. He clamped Ocker's hand on the gun and squeezed until Ocker's grip gave way. Then he caught up Ocker's gun and tossed it across the room. He picked Ocker up bodily, walked across the room with the foreman and threw him through the closed window. Glass shattered and the frame broke with a sharp crack as Ocker's body hurtled through to land heavily in the yard. Johnny turned back to face Chambers, not even breathing hard. "You planning on giving me my time?" he asked.

Chambers hurriedly rummaged in the desk and came up with a cash box. He counted out Johnny's money and handed it to him. Johnny took it and stood a moment, watching Chambers hopefully. Chambers remained still in his chair. Johnny wheeled and left the room.

Outside, Johnny swung up on his horse and sat looking down at the beaten Ocker whose head was bowed in his hands. Ocker said bitterly, "You didn't have to get so tough."

"I hope your back's broke," Johnny said, and rode from the yard.

His anger remained with him all the way to town. He came into the Palace Saloon with blood in his eyes, but the place was deserted, except for a couple of older townsmen who were playing a desultory game of cribbage. Johnny had a drink and leaned on the bar, staring at a second drink. His feelings were all mixed up, and silently he accused Nancy of making him feel like this. It wasn't fair.

The bartender, who had been watching him, moved up. "I hear a nester moved in on you out there, Johnny," he remarked. "Chambers run 'm off yet?"

Johnny looked up at him and said, "Shut up." The man moved away angry and shocked. Johnny DeLancey ordinarily was the easiest-going customer who came into the place. Johnny took the second drink, and with it came some clarity of thought. Chambers and Ocker would go to Flathead Springs now. And Nancy Trent couldn't fight them. If necessary, they would rope her while they burned the place. She would try to fight, though, and with Ocker there, who could tell what would happen? Johnny didn't think Ocker would use his gun, but there was no way of being sure? What had she said about him, Johnny DeLancey? She had called him a little boy. A little boy running from a man's responsibilities. Suddenly Johnny saw she had hit the nail right smack on the head. He saw something else. There was a time for being young and wild, and there was a time for settling down. And Johnny DeLancey had reached that time. He had to go to her and take care of her! He loved her, and needed her. It was plain, once he stopped running long enough to take a look at it. He looked at the bartender who was standing down the bar, muttering.

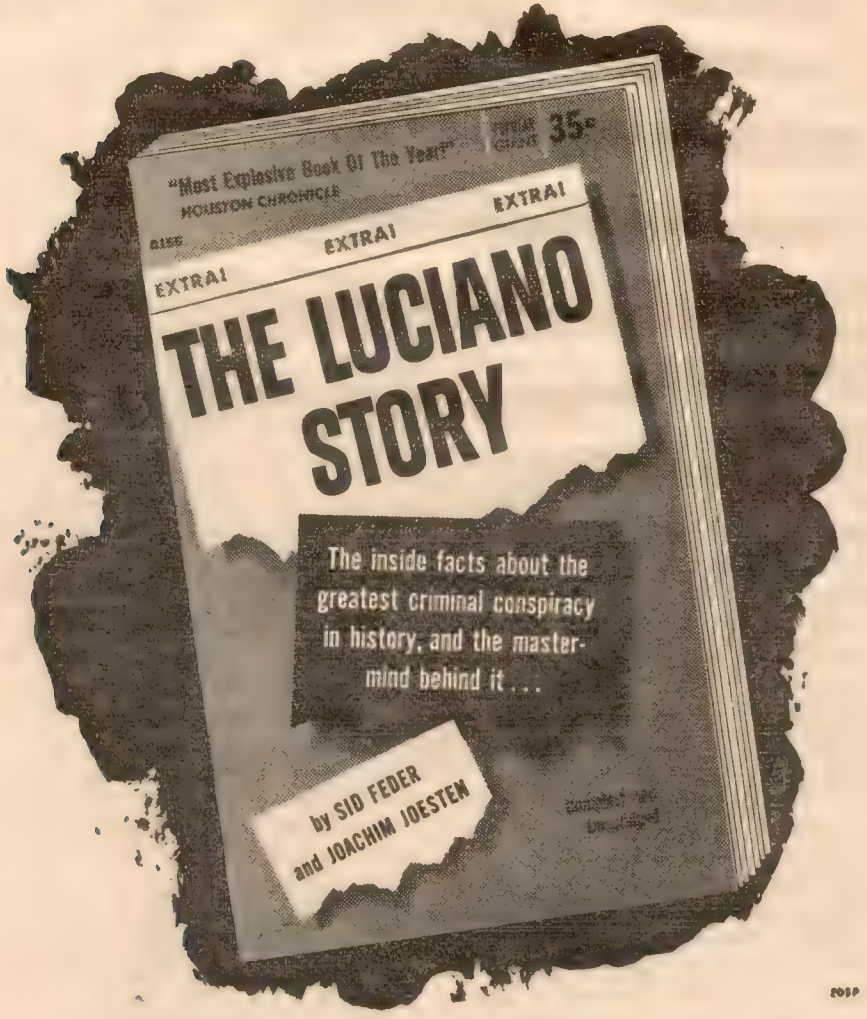
Johnny grinned at him and said, "It's a fine night, friend," and walked out of the saloon. The saloonman stared after him in open amazement.

It was a long ride back to Flathead Springs. Johnny didn't push his horse. Chambers and Ocker would wait for morning before they started anything. If there had been a man out there, they might have come at night. But with a woman to deal with, they wouldn't worry.

Johnny rode up to the gate shortly before midnight and hailed the house. A light came on and a little while later the front door opened. Nancy stood there, plainly framed against the light. He called out his name, went through the gate and rode up to the shanty. He sat slack in the saddle, looking at her, and filled with a sense of well-being. She watched him

(Turn to Page 56)

SECRET LIFE OF MOB CHIEF BARED!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quietly, not smiling.

"What do you want?"

"I came back to see if you still needed a man around the place," he said, and grinned at her.

She said softly, "We need a man, not a boy."

JOHNNY swung down from the horse and came up to her. He stood before her grinning. "I'm growing up, Nancy," he said, and kissed her.

She was still skeptical and shoved him away. She stood a moment, staring at him, her eyes puzzled. "We'll talk about it in the morning," he said. "I'll bed down out here." He turned away and she closed the door, her expression faintly worried.

Johnny put his horse up in the lean-to and bedded down behind the shanty. Chambers would come in from the other way and Johnny wanted all the surprise advantage he could get. He stretched out on the ground with his saddle for a pillow and lay awake a short time, thinking. He wondered, if it came to a fight, how he would come out with Ned Ocker. It started to worry him, but he pushed the worry away. In twenty-two years, he had never worried and it was a little late to start now. He thought of the little gunman running Nancy off this land and anger brushed across his mind and the worry was gone.

The sun had pushed a thin red edge over the rim of the earth when Johnny awoke. He sat up, seeing smoke rising from the shanty's chimney. Getting up, he buckled on his gun and settled it firmly on his hip. He lifted the weapon out of leather, settled it back easily, and moved into the lean-to, out of sight. If the Spur men were coming, they would come now, when sleep was still on the nester family. He leaned against his horse, not thinking. The coldness that always touched him before a fight flowed through him. And then he heard them coming, two horses, moving fast. He was almost glad. If it had to come, it was better to have it over with now.

The two riders rode right up to the gate, unhooked it and came through. He heard them come to a stop, and moved out of the lean-to, keeping well in against the wall of the shanty where he couldn't be seen.

He heard Chambers call, "Come out of there!" A moment later, the ranch owner added, "You're on my land. You'll have to move on!"

Nancy's voice, cold and unafraid, answered him. "We have taken out the patent on this land. We aren't going to move."

Ocker's voice broke in now, heavy with amusement. "I'm going to like this job. You're some looker, honey."

That sent a wave of rage through Johnny DeLancey. He came around the corner of the shanty and stepped away from the wall, flanking the two riders. Ocker was nearest him, maybe ten paces away. There was a small, lewd smile on Ocker's thin lips as he stared at Nancy. She stood in front of them, her chin high, but Johnny saw how tightly her hands were clenched at her sides. His heart went out to her. Neither of the two men had seen him, so intent were they on the girl.

Johnny's voice brought their heads around like the heads of two puppets, quick and jerky.

"Morning, boys. You looking for something?"

Ocker wheeled his horse and faced Johnny head-on. Chambers started to move up beside his foreman, but something in Johnny's face stopped him. He smiled feebly.

"What are you doing here, Johnny?"

"I figure on doing a little farming," Johnny said. "You got any objections, Chambers?"

Ocker was uncertain, and when Johnny saw that he held a faint hope that he might bluff this through. But then Ocker glanced at Chambers. Johnny caught the ranch owner's faint nod. When Ocker faced him again, there was a hard brightness to his stare that told Johnny what was coming.

"You heard what I told that girl,"

Chambers said tonelessly. "It goes for anyone. This is my land. I intend holding it."

"It isn't worth a fight," Johnny told him. "Don't force it. Ride out and leave us alone. That's all we're asking."

OCKER'S face was cut from the glass of the window through which he had been thrown. Hatred was in his thin face. His pride was terrible, unbending, and Johnny had walked all over it. Johnny saw that even if Chambers had elected not to fight, Ocker would have tried to kill him. Resignation briefly touched him, then was forgotten. All of his attention was on Ocker from that moment forward.

Ocker's right hand was down beside him, out of sight. All Johnny had to go on was the look in Ocker's eyes, but that was enough. He saw them widen, saw Ocker's shoulder dip and he drew, standing flat-footed and solid in the dust of the yard. His gun came out and up and unconsciously he lined the barrel on Ocker's thin chest and dropped the hammer. Ocker's gun was out, beside his horse's head. Johnny's slug hit him and he fired at that moment, the bullet slamming into the wall ten feet wide of Johnny. Ocker's horse shied violently, and the foreman hit the ground hard and rolled over and over, his hat sailing from his head. His yellow hair fell into the dust and his eyes stared up at the sky in the blank stare of death. Johnny moved quickly aside, his gun lifting on Chambers. The ranch owner quickly lifted his hands above his head and all the color went completely out of his face.

"Don't shoot!" he said in a thin voice.

"Get down and load him on his horse and get out," Johnny said. "Don't come back."

Chambers did as he was told and rode out of the yard, pulling Ocker's horse with its limp burden. Johnny watched him until he was well out of gun range, then turned to Nancy. She came to him slowly, the fright just now dying from her eyes. He opened his arms and she came into them and dropped her head on his chest. She was shaking so hard it took several moments for it to stop.

"It's all right now," Johnny said, stroking her hair.

She finally leaned back in his arms and looked up at him, with the same warm, soft look that had been in her eyes that first time he had kissed her.

"You knew they were coming," she said, and you came back to take care of us."

"I didn't especially want to," Johnny said. "I never was cut out to be a farmer."

She smiled at him then and said, "There's a preacher in town. He can marry us. I don't think you're going to mind farming." She reached up, pulled his head down and kissed him, and her lips were soft and demanding against his, her arms holding him eagerly. Thinking about it, Johnny thought may be she was right.

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MAN AFRAID

By ROBERT S. ALDRICH

The townsfolk had always considered him worthless, Matt reflected bitterly, and still would after today—after he'd died for them

MATT KIRBY stood in the doorway of Welsh's hardware store, watching the street. A dray was pulled up by the Mercantile, and a couple of cowhands lounged against the posts of Mueller's saloon. Otherwise the streets of Adobe Flats lay bright and empty in the morning sun.

The palms of Kirby's hands were sweaty and his sweat-stained green shirt clung to his slender body. He felt awkward with the heavy Smith & Wesson .44 belted around his narrow waist. The gun felt unfamiliar and apart from himself, as if it were a piece of machinery to which he was tied. Kirby wished he was a gunman. He'd done all his shooting with a squirrel rifle and it seemed to him that none of that boyhood hunting experience would be any good to him now. Nothing in the past was any help. Kirby's left hand touched the dull metal of the deputy

sheriff's star pinned on his chest.

"I don't like this," he said to Joe Welsh who had come up behind him and was standing there with an old man's patience and an old man's resignation in his leathery face. "I didn't ask for this job. I've got a damned good notion to take this badge off and forget about it."

"You can't do that, Kirby," Joe Welsh said. "You gave your word. You can't back out now. Harper's dead and there's nobody else but you to do anything about it. I'd try, but I'd be no good to you. You know that, Kirby." Welsh looked down at his stiff brown hands. "I can back you up with this rifle, but that's all. You've got to do it, Kirby."

"I'm not any law officer," Kirby protested. "We never had anything like this in Adobe Flats before. I never expected this. It was a joke, that's all, Harper giving me this deputy star. It was a joke, and everybody laughed about it."

"Well," Welsh said, squinting out at the dusty street, "it's no joke now."

"No," Kirby said.

HE GUESSED he'd been a joke to some people all his life. Matt Kirby. They'd picked on him when he was a kid, on account of his small size, and he'd learned to laugh when others laughed, so it didn't hurt so much. This town had kicked at him since he had been a hungry kid, since his old man used to lay drunk in the straw down at the livery barn, and he, young Matt, had heard the talk about his mother, not knowing what it meant. He should have pulled out a long time ago. He'd always wanted to move on to some place where nobody knew him, where folks wouldn't look at him with scorn in their eyes, but he hadn't gone. He'd thought about it, but when it had come to packing up and moving, he'd felt scared inside, so he'd stayed.

This is a last kick for me, Kirby thought now. This will be the last time. In an hour I'll be dead. Then maybe they won't laugh any more.

Joe Welsh cleared his throat. "It's no use putting it off, Kirby," he mumbled. "Dave Patton is holed up in there and Jim Montana is with him. So is Bart Case. And they're not going to come out of their own free will. There's only one way to get rats out of their nest, Kirby."

"I know," Kirby said. He wiped sweat from his face. "They can't stay there forever, though, Joe. They've got to come out some time."

"It'd just be harder, then," old Joe said. "You've got them all together now. You know where they are. It'll be better this way than if they was to jump you from all sides. There's nobody to help you out, either, excepting me. You've got to realize that."

"Yes," Kirby said, and then he said, without wanting to, but the words coming out on their own, "I'm scared, Joe."

"'Course you're scared! Hell, who wouldn't be? There's nothing wrong in being scared."

Kirby felt his lean body tremble. "It's not just that, Joe. I'm so scared I'm not sure I can move. My knees don't want to move. I know I've got to do it, Joe, but I don't know whether I can."

"You want me to go with you?" Joe Walsh sounded almost hopeful, lifting his rifle and tucking it under his arm.

"No," Kirby said. "You wouldn't be any good out there, Joe. You'll do me a lot more good covering the street."

"All right," Welsh said. "I just wanted you to know I'll go if you want me to."

"No." Kirby took a deep breath. "I'm going to go over there now."

"Good luck," Joe Welsh said.

Kirby opened the door and went out. The sun met him like the opened door of a furnace. The sky seemed suddenly remote and immense, the space between the frame buildings wider than ever before, and emptier. A breeze lifted a little spiral of dust and wafted it the length of the street. Kirby's legs carried him woodenly. His chest felt as if his heartbeats were coming too slowly. Surprisingly, though, his mind was clear and he planned quickly and with a kind of desperate buoyance.

The odds were no problem to figure. Since Dave Patton had broken jail early

this morning, the outlaw had been smart. Instead of heading back to the Robbers Roost country, he'd stayed right here in Adobe Flats. Sheriff Harper was dead, and with his death had gone the last real law in the town. He knew, too, how scared Kirby was. Last night, behind the rusty cell bars in the tumbledown jail, he'd taunted Kirby, enjoying the way Kirby stayed warily out of reach of his hands.

Patton had kept up a running flow of jeering talk until Kirby had felt as if he were the prisoner and Dave Patton held him in his grasp. Kirby guessed he'd known he couldn't hold Patton in that jail. He'd searched the prisoner, but he must have missed the pick or whatever it was Patton had used to jimmy the old lock.

IT WAS no jail, anyway; a kid could push his way out of it. What he should have done, Matt Kirby thought, was to have stayed right there all night with his gun pointed at Patton, but he hadn't, and he knew why. He'd been scared of what would happen when the half-breed, Jim Montana, and Patton's other pard, Bart Case, arrived and learned their boss had been picked up for killing a mere sheepherder. Matt had told himself it wasn't his concern, anyway. This deputy thing was a joke. Everybody knew that. The town would accept his cowardice just as it would accept his death, without caring one way or the other. They wouldn't step out to help him, but they'd think it was all right when he was killed.

He was going to die; he felt it. Dave Patton and the other two were waiting in that feed store. There was an upstairs window and they could cover the street from there. They could pick him off in a moment, as soon as he covered a few more yards. They could do that, or they could wait. He imagined they would wait for him to move in close. Dave Patton liked his fun and he would instinctively know how Kirby felt.

So the way it looked, Kirby could either head straight for the feed store and get it all over with fast, or he could circle around and start his own waiting game. It wouldn't help him any, except to give him a little more time to live.

There *was* one more thing he could do. He glanced down the street to where the road met the open range and beyond to the saw-tooth blue mountains. He could run. He could get a horse out of the livery barn and start riding and leave the whole damned town to Dave Patton.

The idea excited him, poured through his body like a fresh wind in a stale room. That was all Patton wanted, anyway—to have the town in his pocket. What difference could it make if Matt Kirby was alive or dead? Outside of the satisfaction it would give Patton to kill him, it wouldn't matter to anybody. The town wouldn't be surprised. It would be what they expected. Everybody knew that Matt Kirby was a coward.

Then he thought about Joe Welsh. The old fool would take it on himself to go after Patton, and he'd be killed. Angrily Kirby asked himself why he had to worry about that. It was up to Joe Welsh to choose if he wanted to live or die, same as it was up to him. The town didn't care one way or another.

Kirby stood there in the street a moment longer, feeling the weight of the gun at his hip, a churning sickness in his stomach. He took one last, sad look at the prairie and the blue mountains. It was too late for running. He should have done that ten years ago. He didn't have any place to run to. He wasn't anybody here and he would be less than that away from here. It didn't make any sense—none of it did—but he must have been shaped for this one day, to die for something that didn't matter a hang to anybody.

A little red-haired boy came running out of an alley and stopped.

"Hey, Kirby!" he called.

Kirby waved him back. "You get on home, Tim!"

The kid didn't move. He was a ragged youngster with the tail of his patched shirt sticking out of overalls that had a

hole in one knee. He was the blacksmith's son, Timmy Bryce, and he'd been a nuisance, following Kirby around. He was carrying a toy gun and he pointed it toward the feed store.

"They're in there, ain't they, Kirby? Dave Patton's in there. You going to go in there and arrest them, Kirby?"

"Go on home," Kirby said again. "Get off the street."

The boy just stood there. Kirby ignored him and started down an alley near Chee Long's restaurant. He had nearly reached the end of the alley before he realized the boy was right behind him.

Kirby whirled on him. "You get!" he ordered, his face hot. "Now I'm telling you, get on home!"

THE boy retreated, but stopped. "Don't you want me to go with you, Kirby?"

"No, I don't. There's going to be bad trouble. Now you move quick before I whale you!"

He watched the boy disappear around the corner.

Kirby leaned against the frame wall at the back of a dressmaker's shop. He thought he was going to be sick. He took the .44 out of holster, feeling the solid weight in his hands, and spun the cylinder, examining the five cartridges, leaving the hammer closed on the empty chamber.

Kirby stared at the gun. He hadn't ever thought before about how strange a thing a gun is. How it's made in a factory and even the men who put it together don't know what it's going to be used for. It can be in the hand of some police officer or it can be in the hand of a man with murder in his heart. It doesn't make any difference to the gun; the gun doesn't have feelings. It doesn't matter to the gun whether it kills or what it kills. A gun is just steel, shaped and formed by machinery. Kirby asked himself, what is a man shaped by? Take himself. What was he made for?

Was there some purpose in his being born the son of people who didn't give a hang whether he lived or died? A gun is made to shoot, but it doesn't seem to matter what it shoots or why. It can kill a rabbit or a deer or a man, and it's all the same to powder and casing and steel.

Kirby's thoughts seemed to run on like this, without any will of his own. Somehow, it seemed, he was like this gun, made to do a job without any purpose or sense in the doing of it. Most folks thought he as worthless. They would still think so today, after he was dead.

He was just wasting time, he knew. Joe was right. Putting it off wasn't any good. But still he kept trying to piece his thoughts together. Like that kid, Timmy Bryce. Timmy would grow up and maybe be a fine man like his father, and maybe not. It all deepnded on what he felt he was good for, inside of him. A kid like that wasn't cold and unfeeling like this gun.

Then Matt thought about what would happen after he was dead, and Dave Patton had this town for his own. What would happen to people like the Bryces and old Joe Welsh and the rest? What kind of a town would it be for a kid like Timmy? Would he grow up scared, like Kirby himself, living in the shadow of fear? Or would he come to admire men like Patton and Bart Case and pattern himself after their kind? There was no telling, and Kirby would never know.

He moved out of the alley, and suddenly he was facing the back of the feed store. It was a building set off by itself, which probably was why Dave Patton had picked it to hole up in. As Kirby stood there, debating what to do, his knees weak with the fear in him, he saw Bart Case coming across the clearing behind the store.

Kirby's throat went dry. Bart Case had a big sack in his arms. Groceries, probably. Kirby hadn't even thought about the fact that those three would get hungry. And there was Bart Case, a big, swarthy man, with his gun on him.

For a moment Kirby was too scared to move. Seeing Bart so unexpectedly that way, his mind was still confused with his thinking about the gun. And then anoth-

er idea occurred to him. He was a coward, all right, he wasn't fooling himself about that, but a gun doesn't know if the man who holds it is scared or not. It doesn't matter to the gun who pulls the trigger. And he thought, I'm scared of Bart Case, but this gun isn't scared of a thing.

He took it out of holster and walked away from the shadowy security of buildings.

BART CASE had been watching the back of the fed store and when he turned his head and saw Kirby, he dropped the sack fast and went for his gun. The demand for Case to throw up his hands died on Kirby's lips and he squeezed on the trigger. The gun jerked in his hand with the force of the shot and Kirby stared in dumb amazement as Bart Case's gun spun from his hand. He kept on staring, not believing it, as Case stumbled and sprawled on the back stoop of the feed store. And there was one down!

I didn't even do it, Kirby told himself. This gun did it.

Kirby tore his eyes away from the dead man and looked down at the gun and it seemed an almost human thing there in his hand. He was surprised to see that the hand was not even shaking.

The gun had killed Bart Case because it had been in Kirby's hand before Case could draw. Only he hadn't meant to shoot Case down that quick. He'd meant to give him a chance to surrender, but Case hadn't given him time to say it. And the gun had spoken before Kirby could.

Kirby couldn't see anything through the windows. Patton and Jim Montana must have seen what had happened. They must be watching now for a chance to get him. There was a kind of awe in Kirby that made his chest swell out as if he'd been pumped full of air. Glancing down at the gun, he knew he was going to follow it and let it do a job for him.

He had covered about half the distance to the back of the store when there came a loud crash of window glass and he had a vivid glimpse of Dave Patton's scarred face in the instant before the gun in the window spurted flame. The searing streak that tore through Kirby's left arm was something unreal, as if it weren't happening to him at all. The gun in his hand fired once and Patton's face vanished from the window. Then Kirby was stepping over Bart Case's body there on the back stoop. His hands fumbled a little, pushing fresh cartridges into the gun.

The door wouldn't open and Kirby kicked at it in a futile effort to smash the lock before he used up one bullet that broke the latch. He thrust his foot at the door and jerked out of the way as it tilted open. In that moment he heard two shots crash hollowly inside the store, one on top of the other. Kirby fought down one wild impulse to turn and run, then the gun in his hand was leading him inside because now it had to do the job it was made to do, it had to kill these two men. His own death didn't seem to matter much to Kirby any more.

His mind photographed the scene in the one swift second before anything happened and in that flash of awareness he saw he had miscalculated in some way. Across a pile of grain sacks Jim Montana's body lay limp and motionless. There were not two men left. There was only one—Dave Patton rising up fast from behind the counter, his eyes widening with fear and hate as he spotted Kirby.

That made no more sense to Kirby than the rending shock of Patton's bullet tearing through his side, spinning him around, nor the bucking of his own gun in his hand, nor the open-mouthed, idiotic look on Dave Patton's face as he suddenly crumpled across the counter and rolled onto the floor.

Kirby looked at the gun, the gun that had done this for him, then glanced up as the front door was burst open. Old Joe Welsh was standing there, his old rifle in his hand, and Kirby understood all of a sudden about Jim Montana.

"Couldn't stay put, Kirby," Joe Welsh said. "Not when I saw you going around the back way and I knew you could use some help from out front. I had to try

a shot through the window. Got Montana in the back, but I'm not sorry." He stepped closer, squinting. "You been hurt, Kirby. Bad hurt. We got to get you to a doctor."

KIRBY nodded. He felt the pain bad now and a numbness in his leg, but it didn't seem to matter much.

"You did a fine job, Kirby," Welsh was saying, "a real fine job. I'm proud of you." He glanced toward the street where men were coming, running to see what had hapepned, knowing it was safe now that they'd seen Joe Welsh go in.

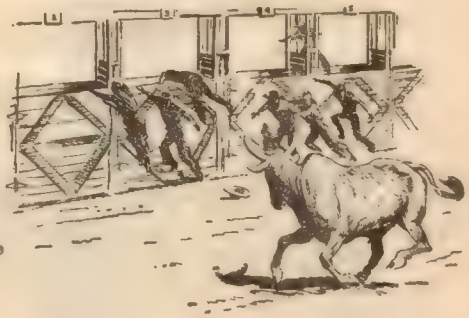
"You know what they'll say now, Kirby," Old Joe said. "They'll think you're quite a man. They'll take off that deputy star and make you a real sheriff." Welsh grinned. "You're going to be a big man in this town. It's going to be your town, boy!"

Kirby was still holding the gun and it suddenly seemed too heavy for him to hang onto it a moment longer. For the first time in long minutes he felt separate from its weight and power. He knew who he was now. He as Matt Kirby, and he had once been afraid.

"Tell them to go to hell," he said.

RODEO

Bands, parades and color,
Grandstands packed to roofs—
Raucous cries of hawkers,
Thud of flying hoofs.



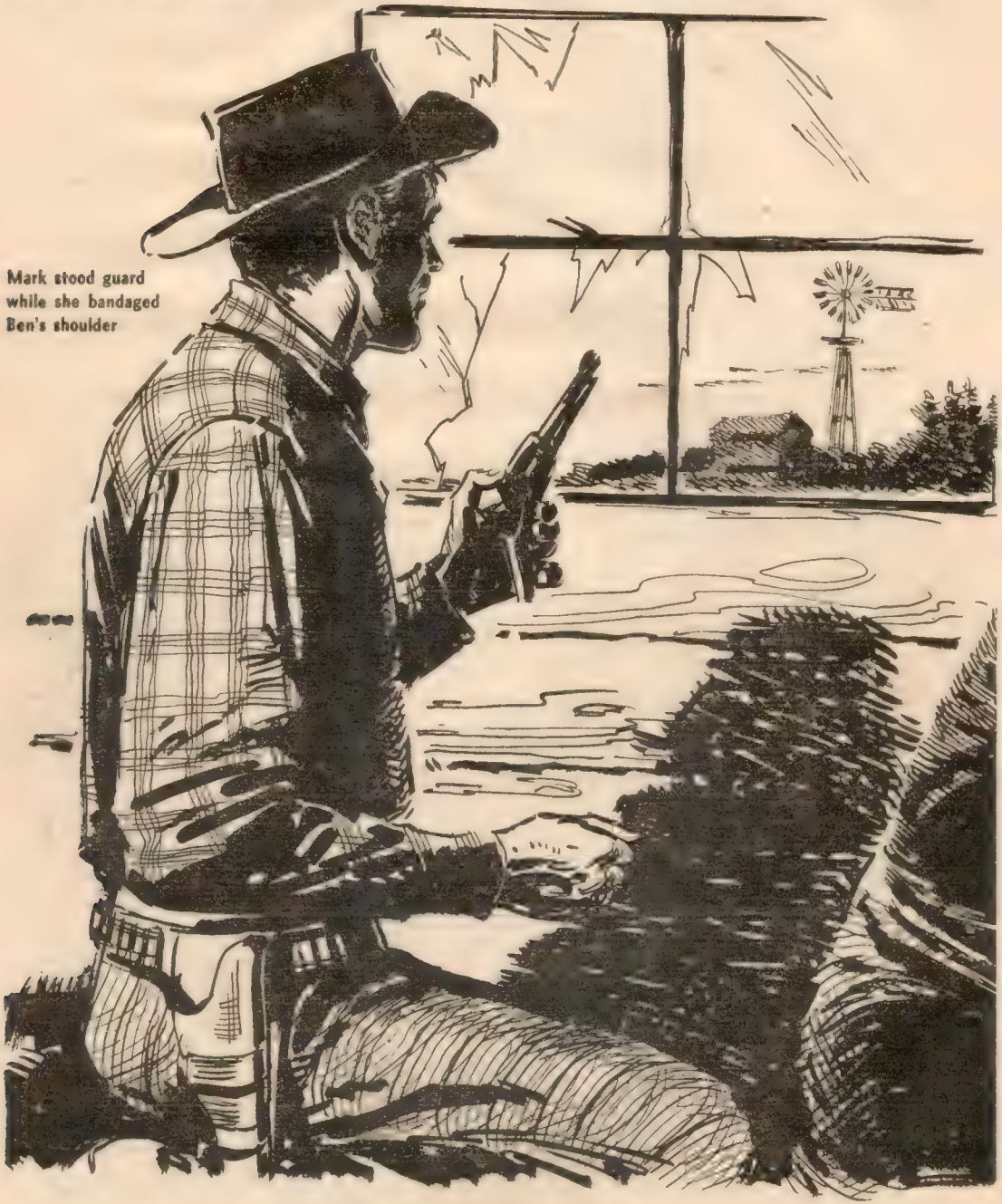
Cowgirls, clowns and Indians,
Ropers, charioteers,
Pick-up men, trick riders,
Broncs and Brahma steers.

Yells of sweating cowboys,
Bawls of frightened brutes,
Clouds of dust obscuring
Horses, men and chutes.

Suddenly a cyclone,
Splintering the gate,
And it's "Shorty Stubbs on Wild Cat,
Coming out of number eight!"

By A. S. HILL

KILLER BEWARE



Mark stood guard while she bandaged Ben's shoulder

a novelet by KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

It could cost him his life, Dorban knew, to prove his partner was no back-shooter and that the lovely widow's bad name was a lie

CHAPTER I

Mistaken Loyalty?

ACTING SHERIFF Lew Reed was sitting on the steps of the shiplap office of Dorban & Vard when the big hay rig swung into the rented lot which served as the outfit's headquarters. Reed didn't call out a greeting of any kind. He merely tilted his head back, following Mark Dorban with a knowing look as the high load passed by.

Dorban swung his six-horse team

around and backed the rig into position beside the empty wagon which stood at one corner of the lot. Climbing down the front rack, he began unhitching the weary draft horses.

Reed got up and came over, but still didn't say anything.

Mark let a trace chain drop and turned his head. "Decided to arrest me, Lew?"

"Might." This Lew Reed was a lazy little man trying to look big and aggressive. He hooked his thumbs over his gunbelt and rocked back on his heels. "I could do it, you know. There's ample grounds."

"Trying to convince yourself, or me? Better be sure before you make the try, friend."

Into Reed's eyes came a look of uncertainty. He started to bluster. "In a minute or two you'll not be so high and mighty. Dammit, I've got a tight case against Chet Vard, and you've admitted you know where he's probably hiding out."

"A mistake on my part," Mark admitted, rubbing a palm along his jaw.

He had a four-day stubble of beard. For the past two weeks he had been doing Chet Vard's work and his own as well, making a trip down to Whitewater one day and back the next, taking the hay out to some ranch or other at night. It didn't leave a man much time.

"Just whisky talk, Lew," he said, and turned back to the horses, slapping one of them on the rump to move him over.

"But it adds up," Reed persisted. "Vard's out in those badlands somewhere, and you and he spent a lot of time there when you were kids. All right; you found a place that might be a good hideout some day, and kept it in mind. Now he's guilty of murder. He caught Ord Tremaine coming out of the widow's place late at night and beat him up, but that wasn't enough for Chet. He had to go get a gun and finish the job. Your covering up for him like you're doing makes you an accessory."

"Lew, you've got a sheriff's mind." Shoving past Reed, Mark went to the heads of the lead horses. He was a big, tough-looking man of twenty-nine, with hat pushed back on unruly dark hair and with weariness in his face. He was getting damned tired of Lew Reed.

THE sheriff trotted after him, terrier-like. "You've had some experience with sheriffs, I understand," he said thinly. "You and Chet, while you were helling around the country after Mrs. Frakes died. Seems like you would have learned to have a little respect for the law. Being in business now, you'd better."

"The law's like anything else, Lew. It gets what respect it deserves, no more and no less." Mark jerked at a rusted snap to free it. Taking care of the harness gear had been Chet's job and Chet always had sloughed it when he could, particularly after he had started courting the widow. "When I'm convinced that Chet killed somebody I might go out and see him about it." And he repeated roughly, "Might."

Reed said in a tone of superior wisdom, "You're going out."

Mark glanced around. Reed was about forty, with a thin, rutted face and indecisive eyes. A four-flusher; one of those talkers who can always dredge up logical-sounding reasons why things should be done their way. Unable to hold a cowhand job, he had latched on to a greenhorn sheriff as deputy. When the sheriff got killed about a year ago Reed had been appointed to fill out the unexpired term, as a matter of course. With less than a year to go, it wasn't hard to figure that he liked the importance and pay of the job and was out now to make a big showing that would be remembered at election time.

"You've got me real scared, Lew," Mark said mockingly. "But what good's it going to do you to have me sitting in that jail of yours?"

"Not what I mean at all, Mark," Lew said hastily. "I'm not arresting you. I don't have to now. All I want is to show you something."

"Show me what?"

"Never mind. Come along." Reed was

smiling and once more held that superior wisdom was in his voice. Mark gave him a long, hard look and shrugged.

"Suit yourself," he said. "I'll put up the horses first."

He tramped along behind the six-horse hitch, taking his time, until he reached the livery stable where he turned the animals over to the kid whom Ed Frakes had hired to help out around the place. The kid gave Mark an oddly strained look, but didn't say anything.

Reed prodded, "This way, friend," and turned down a side street.

There was a small crowd in front of Doc Wiswell's place. The crowd parted to allow Reed and Dorban to pass through. Here again Mark received odd looks; but nobody said anything. Inside the house Mrs. Wiswell, a plump, gray-haired woman, led the way to a back room where the doctor was washing his hands in a china basin.

"He come out of it yet?" Reed asked impatiently.

"A little. I gave him an injection just now, though." The doctor, a big-city man thoroughly soured on frontier life, made a gesture toward the still figure on the bed.

Glancing past Lew Reed, Mark saw a head with thin white hair straggling over bandages through which blood had seeped. The face had a sunken, pallid look. It belonged to Ed Frakes. Mark swore in a low voice, and thrust suddenly forward.

"Ed!"

The old man's eyelids fluttered. "Mark? Chet came—to the house—" The voice trailed away.

Mark swung around. Reed, watching him with a show of sympathy, said, "Some time last night. The kid at the stable didn't get worried till about noon, then went out to Frake's place and found Ed on the kitchen floor. Pistol-whipped, I would say, and a good job of it had been done. You ready to go after Chet now?"

MARK gave him a silent look and turned back to the bed. Ed and Martha Frakes had raised two orphans. One of them had been Mark Dorban; the other had been Chet Vard. Mark couldn't believe that Chet had done this thing, and yet he asked:

"Ed, can you hear me? Ed, did Chet do this to you?"

The bandaged head stirred weakly on the pillow. "Don't know. Chet wanted . . . money. I fed 'im . . . was putting wood in the stove to heat dishwater when . . . No, not Chet! He'd . . . gone. Somebody sneaked in behind me. Never seen who—" The old man sighed deeply and his breathing changed a little, becoming more regular.

"Opiate's taking effect," the doctor said. "You won't get anything more out of him this time."

Lew Reed was disappointed, and let it show.

"Well," he said, "it's all pretty plain anyway. Chet didn't get the money he was after, so he worked up a temper and slipped back into the house. He's a great one for thinking things over, and then going back to finish them up."

That wasn't right. Chet Vard was an untidy, rough-talking galoot who had a man's size and years but no stability. He would blow up over nothing at all, then grin and admit he was sorry. No schemer at all. This was the main reason why Mark had been so doubtful that Chet had had anything to do with the shooting of Ord Tremaine.

Now, though, Mark was forced to wonder. After all, it was possible for someone to act in a manner that seemed contrary to his nature, as a way of fooling people.

"I'll get a posse together right away," Lew Reed said.

"Some more of those towners you've had ramming around in the badlands?" Mark asked. "Don't bother. I said I *might* go out, and that didn't include anybody else. If I find that Chet did this to Ed I'll fetch him in for you. Alone."

Reed started his blustering again. "I've got the authority here and when I order a man to—"

"Take it outside, you roughnecks," the doctor interrupted. "I'm trying to save

this man's life, and I'll have it quiet in here."

"Do the best you can for him, Doc," Mark said, and went on out.

Ignoring the crowd's question about old Ed's conditions he shoved hurriedly through and let them collar the sheriff for information. Reed yelled at him to wait, but he increased his stride.

When Mark Dorban used his key to open up a little office on the hay lot he found just about what he had been expecting to find. The box in which the partners kept petty cash was open. And empty, except for a scrawled note:

> Mark:
> Sorry, but I need traveling money. No use my staying around here—I can't prove anything and I'm tired of being a lonesome dog.
> Chet.
> P. S. Take care of old Ed. He's hitting the bottle again.

That postscript didn't sound like the thinking of a man who had just left Ed on his kitchen floor, beaten up. Maybe Chet had come here first. But still, he mentioned Ed's drinking, and he wouldn't have known about that unless he had talked to the old man. Mark crumpled the note, went out into the dusk twilight and sat down on the step.

He knew where Chet would have holed up. That old mine tunnel, the one they had come onto the time they'd got the prospecting bug. Mark had been sixteen then, Chet a couple years younger. A long time ago; three years before Martha Frakes died. After her death things had gone wrong. The old house at the north edge of town hadn't been home any more, with Ed drunk and in a bad mood most of the time.

CHET and Mark had struck out for themselves, over into Montana with a horse-breaking job at first, then down through Colorado and New Mexico. Cowpunching here and there, grub-lining between times, some troubles of one kind and another which taught them that you had to grow up and fit yourself into the rules of the world. And, once when they'd been flat broke and not too proud to blister their hands and work afoot, a job scything hay for a granger.

It was the hay job that did it. An idea which had been forming in Mark's mind leaped to full bloom. The ranchers of Hatchet Basin were typical north-country stockmen, enjoying lush graze during the summers but letting their cattle get through the winters as best they could. Most times, the stock that treatment didn't winter-kill came through gaunted and weak.

Mark and Chet returned to Hatchet. They set about persuading the ranchers that feeding sheds and winter hay were the answer. A long, slow pull—it had taken them three years. One rancher had tried it in a tentative way, then another and another. Now they all wanted feed, all that Dorban & Vard could buy from the grangers around Loon Lake and ship up the river to Whitewater, the head of navigation.

The hay business was fine for keeping a man busy and out of trouble, if he stuck to the hay business. Chet Vard had started courting the widow of Sheriff Lowman, for which nobody could blame him. She was a truly beautiful woman in spite of having Eastern ways. Then Chet had got into trouble with Ord Tremaine, an elderly lawyer who hardly seemed qualified to be called a competing suitor. After which Tremaine had been found in his buggy outside town, shot dead.

Lew Reed had tried to arrest Chet right away and had made a mess of it, as might have been expected of him. Chet disappeared into the high badlands over against the Sawtooth Mountains, a fool thing for him to do, but a natural one in view of the circumstances against him. There hadn't been much of anything that Mark Dorban could do. Chet was known to have a red-headed temper and he had beaten up Tremaine before the killing.

Mark had been waiting for something to break—the case against Chet had seemed a little too pat—but he hadn't expected anything like this senseless beating of poor old Ed Frakes. If Chet had

done it, it had been a cruel and crazy thing. Mark couldn't believe it, but he had to find out.

Now, with Chet leaving the country altogether, Mark had to move and move fast.

The widow might know something important; Chet had been in town last night, and might have visited her and talked with her. Mark got up and was tramping off the lot when a man loomed up out of the dusk and said, "Evening, Dorban."

It was John Cassiter, who had a corner on the cattle-buying business in Hatchet Basin. Cassiter was one of those big, impressive-looking men who make the most of their appearance. About fifty, he sported a bushy mustache and wore his hat cocked low over one eye. He carried a nickel-plated sixgun with ivory grips. People like the Lowmans and Doc Wiswell, when they first arrived in Hatchet, always mistook Cassiter for a real Western badman, which visibly pleased and amused him.

Mark told him good-evening, and waited politely.

CASSITER chewed his unlighted cigar. "Nice little business you've worked up here," he mentioned. "Still charging only twenty dollars for hay?"

"That's the price."

"Friend, you're a fool. You've got everything your way now. The ranchers realize that they've got to have hay, and that Swede who runs the river boat won't push a barge upriver for anybody but you."

"Been making inquiries, John?" Mark asked mildly.

Cassiter chuckled in the gathering dark and said, "I nose around. The Swede has taken a liking to you, as has everyone else. But why bend over backwards to keep everybody's esteem? Now's the time to cash in a little. Charge what the hay is worth to those rich cattlemen. You could get sixty a ton, easy as falling off a log."

"We're not geared for that," Mark said. "We make a profit, and we don't have to store the stuff here and take chances on some drunk setting our stacks afire."

"And so you work yourself to death, carrying that wild partner of yours on your back, for a bare living." Cassiter shrugged and his teeth gleamed faintly about the butt of his cigar. "Well, it's your privilege. When I was young I didn't like to take advice either. Too bad Vard had to get himself in trouble, eh? A bad thing, his beating Ed Frakes with a gunbarrel and walking out leaving him for dead like that."

"If," Mark said, "Chet was the one who did it."

"I can understand how you feel. But I hear you're going out after him anyhow. Lew Reed is getting up a posse to accompany you—wanted me to join up, but I told him I'd had enough of riding around that badlands country. I don't fit well in a saddle any more. And this time, I've a notion that it might get dangerous," Cassiter said.

"I told Lew not to do that," Mark said. "I made it plain to him that I was going out alone."

"So?" Cassiter seemed amused. "You know Lew. That star rides heavy on his vest." He cocked his cigar to a high angle. "Think you'll get out of town on that basis?"

"I'll do it my way or not at all." Mark was definite.

"You're a stubborn sort, for a fact. Well, this ought to be worth a man's time. I'll be watching. And don't worry about me tipping off the sheriff if I happen to see you leaving town alone, friend. I don't much like that tinhorn myself."

Mark didn't say anything. Cassiter thumbnailed a match and held its flame to the end of his cigar, watching him in a quizzical way.

Then he grunted and tramped back out to the street.

Mark went back to the office, where he took his little-used gun rig down from a nail and strapped it about his hips. After checking the weapon's cylinder to see that it was loaded he slid it back into the holster and went outside.

CHAPTER II

West Is West

ALLIE LOWMAN, faced with the necessity of earning a living after the death of her husband, had converted the front room of her house into a small eating place. Tall for a woman and yet possessing her full share of warm feminine charm, she was a mystery to most of the folks around Hatchet town. She was pleasant and friendly with customers; but a cowhand who thought he could start something with the comely young widow soon found out different. Her being from the East had something to do with that, probably. She wasn't exactly stuck-up but she did hold herself aloof, perhaps disapproving of people who must seem, to her, a rough and unruly lot.

She was sitting at one of the tables when the tinkle of the small bell above the door announced Mark's arrival. She got up, her body moving lithely under her thin dress, and lifted a hand to pat a wave of brown hair into place.

She smiled at him with a warmth that made him wonder, but then her glance flickered down to his gun rig and she said gravely, "Good evening, Mark. Supper?"

Mark put his hat on a table and sat down. "Just coffee, ma'am, and some of that apple pie. Don't feel like eating a whole meal right now."

She gave him a somber, understanding look. "Because of Chet," she said, and went out into the kitchen.

Mark's big body squirmed on the chair. He wasn't cut out for this detective business, didn't know how to go about it. He didn't know Allie well, and he wasn't geared for prying into people's personal lives, and yet he was going to have to pry. It made him feel mean. He was almost a stranger to her, at best; although he had eaten here quite often when she first opened up the place, he had stayed away after Chet had started courting her.

Her husband, Hugh Lowman, had been one of those educated law officers. After having been taught all about law enforcement in some high-toned school back East he had come out here to make a name for himself with the Pinkertons. He'd done well enough at it to be recommended for this sheriff job when the big-ranch owners of Hatchet Basin finally decided that something had to be done about the rustling here.

That rustling was the ranchers' own fault, to Mark Dorban's direct way of thinking. The way they had formerly run things, carrying big crews during the summers and laying off heavily when fall came, threw a lot of broke and idle men into town during the slack season. Cowhands never had anything saved up. Needing money to live on, plus something extra for whisky and cards and women of the sort who lived upstairs over the saloons, they were sure to find ways of getting it.

Disapproving that didn't change it at all; it was the way life ran in this country. And some of the cowhands, having tasted big and easy money, weren't minded to go back to their former on-and-off employment. Nor to spend the winters pitching hay, now that things weren't steadier.

The big ranchers, who controlled the vote, and imported Hugh Lowman and put him in the sheriff's office. Lowman had been thirty at the time, an all-right sort, ambitious, but not really cut out for the rough stuff. He had some ideas about the rustling not being the hit-or-miss proposition everybody thought it was—though he never did say just what those ideas were—and he was going to take care of the matter in a hurry. Thinking himself established for two years, at least, he had sent for his young wife. A month after her arrival he had been dragged into town by his horse, one foot caught in the stirrup. Two rifle bullets had gone completely through his body, and one through his head.

Everyone in the town had been shocked by the sight.

EVERYONE had expected Allie Lowman to go back East at once. She had reason to hate this country. And yet she had stayed on.

Aware now that she had been in the kitchen for some considerable time, Mark craned around and saw her coming out. She had done something to her hair. Placing his pie and coffee before him, she took the cover from the sugar bowl, then sat down opposite him.

"Mark, I'm sorry," she said. "It was a terrible thing, Mr. Frakes being beaten up like that. Have you heard how he is doing?"

"I've got a hunch he'll pull through. That Wiswell is a good doctor, in spite of the growling he does."

The coffee was freshly made and fragrant. Mark tasted it and found it good. He looked at Allie Lowman and saw that her dress, which at first glance seemed conservative, was artfully fitted to shapely roundness. It was the sort of dress that would be worn by a woman who wanted to attract attention. Well, what woman didn't? For a stricken moment, though, it made him wonder if all that talk about her was correct. And so he threw his question at her, straight-out:

"Was Chet here last night?"

A flush stained her cheeks. "No. I had told him several weeks ago, Mark, never to come here again."

She wasn't lying. If Mark Dorban had ever seen truth in a woman it was in this one, her wide-apart eyes touched with sadness and loneliness, but meeting his gaze squarely. And what she said added up; Chet had been restless and quarrelsome for about that length of time, and drinking heavily, too.

People in Hatchet Basin took their gossip straight and in strong doses. And Allie, still more or less a stranger in this land after nearly a year, was a prime target for it. Failing to understand her, people watched her and talked about her. When Ord Tremaine had been observed calling upon her late at night after her restaurant was closed, jaws had started wagging. Cowhands of her own age weren't good enough for the Eastern woman, but a down-at-the-heels old dandy—well, it gave them something to talk about. And it wasn't exactly new for a distraught young widow to make a strange choice of male companionship.

She was no hussy, but if Mark Dorban was any judge she wasn't one of those cold-blooded females, either. Mark didn't know how far Chet had got with her, but he did know Chet, rough and demanding in his ways.

The gossips had it all figured out, saying that Chet had replaced Tremaine but that the fickle widow had gone back to her aged lover once more. And that Chet, in a fit of understandable jealousy, had shot Tremaine after admittedly beating him up. There it was, everything simple and neatly wrapped up.

Too damned simple, Mark suspected now. He had never permitted himself to wonder about matters that were none of his proper concern, and yet he had to make them his concern now, when anything might supply the important key to all that had happened. He hated to think of Allie in this way but it was necessary.

She seemed to sense the dark and ugly current of his thinking. She stiffened and lifted her head, eyes showing deep hurt and mouth tightening resentfully. She, too, must be aware of the gossip.

And then he knew that it was all wrong. He couldn't believe in it, not a shred of it. Allie Lowman wasn't that sort of woman, for one thing. For another—the big thing—Mark Dorban had, like any lonely man, been building campfire dreams of the image of his desires. He had seen that image in Allie Lowman, but he had stood aside. First, on account of her being married, and then for Chet Vard.

HE COULDN'T ask her about Chet now, nor about Tremaine either. The reason was that he was in love with her himself, and had been for a long time. He refused to believe, and he didn't want to hear.

I'm a hell of a poor stick as a detective,

he thought ruefully.

She said, "Mark, you're carrying a gun tonight."

He nodded woodenly and gulped a portion of the pie, washing it down with coffee. He wondered if she could read him. Did a man in love look as much like a poor forlorn damn fool as he felt?

"They're saying you will go out for Chet, after—after what happened to Mr. Frakes."

"I'm going out."

She reached both of her hands across the table to touch his arm. "Mark, don't do it. Please—you mustn't! Chet was—mistaken, but he wouldn't kill anyone, not the way poor Mr. Tremaine was killed. It just isn't in him, Mark, to be a sneak. Nor to harm Ed Frakes, either. Oh, I can't understand you Western people, sometimes. You're so rough and—well, blatant about small things, and so shy about the big ones. Chet is just an overgrown boy, really."

"He's a fool. He's made one mistake after another, hiding out, sneaking into town for money like he did. Now he's making the biggest mistake of all, trying to leave the country. I'm going to stop him. If he's on the square I'll help him any way I can. But if he's the one who pistol-whipped old Ed, I'll gun him down."

Allie looked at him reproachfully. "You can't believe he did such a thing. For a long time I thought that Chet was your brother, and that Mr. Frakes was your father. And I wondered about your names being different."

"No relation," Mark said shortly. "Chet was staying in town with the Frakeses so he could go to school, when his folks died in a blizzard. I drifted here after my dad got killed in a freight-wagon turnover, and they took me in, too, and raised both of us."

"They adopted you?"

"No, just raised us. There's not much legal red tape in this country, ma'am."

"Nor much decency either, I sometimes think." As if her own words had startled her she smiled faintly in apology and added, "I didn't mean about that. And I spoke too harshly. It's just that values are so different, and hard to get used to. If things don't go to your liking you strap on a gun."

She hadn't been thinking about that, either. She had been thinking about the gossip, which had been vicious and cruel; Mark could sense that. But he said, "Rough country, rough country."

"Mark, please don't shoot Chet! There's—more to this than you think. Give him a chance."

"I'll give him every chance. But not to put his neck in a noose by running away. As I said, if he's in the right—" A new thought hit Mark Dorban then, stopping him. Jealousy was a twisting pain within him. It forced words out, and he couldn't help that. "You don't want Chet hurt, ma'am, isn't that it?"

"I don't want anyone hurt, when it's all on my account." Allie covered her face with her hands. "Oh, Mark, I'm so ashamed! I'm not entirely a fool, nor deaf either. Mrs. O'Reilly, who comes in to wash dishes when I'm busy, is the worst gossip in Hatchet, so I know what people are saying. It's unfair! And Chet believed it. He must have, to beat poor old Ord—"

AT THAT moment Ben Clayton came through the doorway from the kitchen, trying to move quietly but unable to subdue the tinkle of his spurs.

He said urgently, "Mark, they're coming here after you. Best get out of here pronto, if you don't aim to be the tail to Lew Reed's kite."

Ben Clayton was an old-timer with a knowing, leathery face and little respect for anything in the world except a fast horse. Rheumatic and chronically out of work, he had been pestering Mark for a job ever since Chet's escape from Lew Reed. Ed had been everything in the book, and cheerfully admitted it—horse-thief, mine highgrader, mavericker, among a few more legitimate things. He had stated, with dry humor, that old age had cut him down to where he couldn't be much of anything but honest any more. But since mighty few cowhands

could handle an unwieldy hayrack rig and a six-horse hitch, Mark had hesitated to hire him.

Mark got up from the table. "Who's coming, Ben?"

"Who you think?" Old Ben remembered to remove his hat from his balding head, and he slanted Allie a glance of apology for having entered by way of the kitchen. "Lew Reed and the posse he's been gatherin' up. Real substantial citizen's; no cowpokes allowed. Most of 'em so seat-sore—begging pardon, ma'am—from the last time he had 'em out looking for Chet, that they got to stand on their stirrup leather." Ben went over to a window. "They're pulling up in front right now. I got a couple of fast horses out in the alley an' we better be using 'em before Reed gets the bright idea of sending some boys around there to trap you."

Ben had it right in more ways than one. Another posse of towners; a choice slanted thoughtfully toward the approval of the big ranchers who would control the coming election. Reed knew that the ranchers suspected any out-of-work cowhand of being a rustler, so he wouldn't use them, although they would have formed a far more capable posse than the one he had. On a weekday evening like this, few if any working cowhands would be in town. Reed wasn't sending out to the ranches for them, either; he was going to handle this with the inept help he had at hand, and thus make himself look bigger in the eyes of the ranchers. Reed was a fool.

Well, that was a break, in a way, for Mark Dorban. He started toward the kitchen, then stopped. "Forgot to pay you, ma'am," he said, turning and fumbling in a pocket.

"It's free, Mark." Allie was standing by the table with his pie plate, cup and saucer balanced on her hand. Smiling faintly, she added, "For the things you didn't say. Mark, do give him a chance. And—" color mounted in her cheeks—"please be careful."

An odd thing for her to say, he thought as he hurried out through the kitchen at old Ben's limping heels. Still, maybe not so odd; she had a woman's compassion, and would have felt concern for anyone who was going into danger. About the grub, she had said it was free; for the things you didn't say. There was even more to Allie Lowman than he had suspected. Hell, she had read him like a book.

He wondered how deeply she had read.

CHAPTER III

No Intimidation

LEW REED was in the alley, with three other men, when Clayton and Mark reached it. Reed possessed a certain canny foresight, all right. The moon was up, and in its pale light the sheriff made an important show of stepping forward with drawn gun.

"Dorban," he warned, "these men are deputized. Don't be making any mistakes, now."

You never could tell about a man who had a gun in his hand. It required no particular courage to pull a trigger; a twitch of fear might be enough.

Mark moved slowly toward Reed, saying, "Lew, I told you that I was going out alone."

"To help your partner get away? Not this time, mister. Who are you to set yourself above the authority of the law, and decide what you will or won't do? . . . Malley, get around behind him and take his guns."

A storekeeper moved timidly forward. The other two men, Mark noticed, were holding the horses that Clayton must have brought here. Mark heard old Ben's hand slap the butt of his gun and he said, "Ben," in a way that stopped that. Mark looked at Malley. "No closer, friend."

"Malley, go ahead!" Reed prodded excitedly. "I've got him covered."

Mark was almost close enough to Reed now. He said in a flat voice, "I'm going

to tell you something, Lew. Chet is planning to clear out of the country, as you've probably guessed. Maybe he's gone already. If you did happen to get close to him with this bunch of yours he'd start shooting and somebody would get killed. I'm not buying in on that. Now, you can shoot me if you want to, I suppose; but if you do that you'll never find out where to look for him."

While the sheriff was digesting that, Mark took a long stride forward. Reed's attention fastened itself upon Mark's holstered gun. He watched the weapon as if fascinated, steeling himself visibly. And yet Mark made no effort to draw the gun, but took another slow stride. Reed licked his lips, indecision writhing in his face. Shooting an empty-handed man wouldn't make him out a very brave figure, and yet he seemed to realize that he was in danger of some sort, and he didn't know exactly what to do about it.

"Keep back from me, damn you!" he said stridently, backing up until he bumped against one of the horses, with stirred uneasily. "I've got authority to kill you if—"

"Better read that law book again," Mark advised. "See if it says anything about getting information out of a man after you've shot him."

Mark moved ahead once more. Now he was close enough. Reed was watching his right hand and gun with a sort of fixed, terrified attention. He was finding out, perhaps for the first time, that the mere fact that he had the drop didn't mean too much in the case of a man who refused to be cowed by it.

It was Mark's left hand that struck, chopping in sideward and knocking the gun aside.

The gun went off, but the red blast of it erupted past Mark's body, hot gases pushing at his right arm with sudden and surprising force. It had been a close thing, all right; but he had figured Reed's indecisive nature correctly. He wrenched the weapon from the sheriff's hand and tossed it aside, at the same time throwing his weight against Reed so that the man lost his balance and fell underneath the horse.

THE three towners weren't making any trouble; old Ben had his gun out by now. Mark pulled Reed from under the horse, which had begun to pitch.

"Dorban, get your damn hands off me!" Reed squalled. "You're under arrest!"

Mark laughed at him. "You poor damned fool," he said. "Ben, get the guns off those gentlemen and toss them in the flower bed there."

Mark waited, and saw that Ben was having no trouble with the others. There hadn't been much fight in them to start out with. Glancing around, he saw that Allie had come out onto her back porch and was standing quite motionless there, hands pressed against her cheeks. A lovely woman, who kept a clean house and nice flowers. Mark had always liked flowers. Well, her opinion of him wouldn't be elevated any by all this. Manhandling a sheriff—more of the sudden and violent doings of the rough sort who inhabited this country, she would be thinking.

Reed was saying shrilly, "You'll regret this! You'll hang right along with Vard, now!"

"Oh, chop it!" Mark said roughly, and shoved Reed away from him so hard that the little man staggered backward down the alley a few yards.

Ben Clayton was mounting hurriedly, still holding his gun in one hand and giving Mark a warning look. Mark didn't need to be told; men out in the street had heard the shot and were shouting timid inquiries about it now. In a minute they would work up enough nerve to come through between the houses and into the alley. Mark stepped onto the saddle of the other horse.

"Dorban, I forbid—" Reed began. "What you going to do?"

"Exactly what I told you I'd do," Mark said, and lifted the reins.

Like most old men, Ben Clayton liked to talk. After the first plunging run of the horses had carried him and Mark out of town and they slowed the pace somewhat, he chuckled and said:

"Reminds me of old times. You might of got yourself killed back there, bucko boy."

"Man's got to take chances sometimes."

"That tinhorn was purely spooked. There he was, holding a gun on you and you paying no attention to it. He didn't know whether to hiss, spit or rattle. You're going to have that sheriff down on you, friend."

"So will you. Ben, you had no business pitching in on this, but thanks for doing it."

"Gives a man something to do." Old Ben glanced back, then sought a more comfortable position in his saddle. "Beats all, don't it, the hell that can get raised on account of some pretty skirt or other? Real looker, that one, in spite of her Eastern airs. Warm-natured, too, from the talk—"

"Careful, Ben."

The old man cocked a knowing look. "You, too?" He changed the subject. "Where we headed?"

"Away from town. We can split up after awhile. You better go some place else for a month or two."

"There's gratitude for you. Help a man out, steal a good fast horse for him to ride, and he rewards you by tossin' you to the wolves."

Mark sent him a startled look. "You steal this horse?"

"Well, he's not one of them livery nags that couldn't last two miles at a run. Best mounts around here belong to them wideloop boys, and one of 'em happened to be waiting at a saloon hitch-pole I passed."

Mark laughed shortly and said, "You've got me, Ben." He had an odd feeling of trust for the old reprobate. "You can come along. Do you know who the rustlers are?"

BEN spoke with the slow precision of a man choosing his words carefully. "Well, a man'd have to be a fool not to have a pretty fair idea. That rustling is not any matter of a few boys getting together to make a cut of somebody's stock on a dark night. They've got system. Who are they? There's eight or ten boys that haven't worked for years. Doin' a little prospectin', is what they say. Does that bring 'em the money they throw around so free and easy?" He snorted. "Sheriff that had sense enough to sit back and watch and think, in place of pounding around making a big thing of being busy, ought to figure it out. I tried to ease in with the boys but it was no go. Too old and busted-down, they claim, for such rough work as prospecting. Hell! First thing a rustler has got to look for is a place to sell the beef he takes, and the only place in easy reach is them big British syndicate ranches on the other side of the Sawtooths. What the boys meant was they didn't want me cluttering up their dark-of-the-moon drives through them mountains. Besides not trusting me too much, maybe."

"Hugh Lowman," Mark said slowly, "looked into that syndicate thing right away. He found out that they hadn't been buying any cattle from this side."

"That a fact? Kind of ties a knot in that notion I had, don't it?" Ben waited for a reply and, getting none, finally added, "We're headed for the badlands, heh? Chet's up there after all?"

"We're headed that way, Ben."

A man didn't make it from Hatchet to the badlands in one run, unless he wanted to kill his horse in doing so. Mark and Ben stopped at a creek on the upper reach of the Bradded L Diamond range to water their horses and to let them rest. They lounged around on the grass, smoking and talking, for the better part of an hour. There was no indication of pursuit from the town. On the way out they had taken a twisting course among hills and stands of timber. Lew Reed would be back there somewhere, fretting and arguing with his scratch posse of towners who were saddle-sore to begin with and who wouldn't be able to see any sense in continued riding around in search of a man who had got away from them.

Mark and Ben went on. Out here, the country made a long and gradually steep-

ening lift toward the base of the mountains. The character of the ground changed, deep and springy grass sod giving way to bare earth that had been eroded into myriad gullies, with an isolated tree here and there. During wet years there was grass on it, but it was not reliable graze. Stockmen had once been deceived by that, and had established ranches up here, but had been forced to abandon them.

Farther up, where storm water ran faster, there were deep canyons which reached down like crooked skeleton fingers, shadowed now in the moonlight, white-bottomed with alkali by day. In one of those canyons was that old mine tunnel, its tailings dump washed away long since and its entrance cloaked by brush. Inside it was a hollowed-out room where the miner had lived and in which he had left some of his equipment when he had pulled out. A room large enough to shelter a horse, if a man wanted to keep his mount out of sight. A perfect hideout. Two kids had camped in there long ago, and had discussed that.

Mark wondered if Chet would still be there, or if he had already struck out across the Sawtooths. Rising on his stirrups to identify the particular canyon, he heard old Ben's low-voiced exclamation of warning.

TURNING quickly to look back, Mark saw the lights of Hatchet in the distance. He glimpsed only one rider, about a mile away and now dropping out of sight in a gully.

"Not there, dammit!" Ben said, and plucked at Mark's sleeve. He pointed.

The real danger was closer. Four riders were coming at them from the right, cutting boldly across country, flying hooves stirring up a long plume of dust. Not towners at all; those men could ride.

"This horse you stole," Mark said bitingly. "You stirred them up by that, Ben. . . . Well, come on." He pulled his horse around, rearing, and with mouth wetly protesting the bit, and headed toward a small, twisted pine tree that grew at the edge of a gully.

Both the horses were winded and staggering now, exhausted by the long climb. But the other four riders were out of range when Mark and Ben reached the tree and dismounted, both knowing what they would have to do. The tree had put up a stubborn battle for existence in this raw land, but rain had washed dirt away from its thick and twisting roots so that they now lay on top of the ground. After rump-slapping their tired mounts down into the gully, the two men flung themselves flat behind the thickest of the roots.

The approaching riders bunched up and stopped, well beyond pistol shot.

"Dorban!" A voice that Mark did not recognize floated to his ears. "We don't want you—we want Chet Vard! Show us where he's at and you can ride out. Get stubborn about this and we'll run you down."

Mark glanced at old Ben in slack-jawed astonishment. His first guess had been that those four were rustlers who had been in Hatchet town tonight and had ridden out fast, probably changing to fresh mounts at some hideout they had up here. They certainly were not cowhands, hurriedly recruited by Lew Reed; if they had been, Reed would be here with them, officiously bossing things. No, this was something else.

They weren't interested in the stolen horses, either. But they, too, wanted Chet Vard. Why? This was something entirely new and unlooked-for. Mark's mind groped with it but didn't get anywhere.

"What do you want with Vard?" he shouted.

"Never mind that." One of the riders unbooted a rifle and threw a shot which knocked bark from the trunk of the tree before screeching off across the gully beyond. "How's it going to be, mister?"

Old Ben said, "Sounds like a real tough one, don't he? Now I wish I owned a rifle. Bucko, you been called. You made that brag that you knowed where Chet was hiding and that nobody could find 'im, and it's too late to back down. It'd be

easy to let 'em have 'im, wouldn't it? Anxious like they are, I'd say they must be wanting 'im dead."

"Chet never had anything to do with that bunch," Mark said angrily. "And maybe he'd gone on, anyway." He lifted his head a small fraction of an inch, wondering if Chet had gone on or was still at the tunnel. If he were there he must have heard that rifle shot.

"Be kind of bad for you if he's gone," Ben pointed out drily. "Good, though, if he's still around handy. What difference does it make to you whether he gets plugged by them roughnecks or hanged by Lew Reed? Either way, you got a paying business all to yourself, everything hunky-dory. Ord Tremaine gone, Chet gone. What's to keep you from gathering up that lady for yourself?"

"Ben, leave off that sort of talk."

BEN spat and laid his gun across the root. "Don't froth up at me, now. Just voicing what's going on in your own head if you're more'n half awake, is all. Or are you fool enough to make a fight of it, sixguns against Winchesters?"

"You can pull out," Mark said roughly. "Get on your horse and ride down the gully."

Ben didn't give him any direct answer. The old man muttered something about fools, tilted his gun to a higher angle and fired a shot. After a moment one of the distant horses leaped and plunged, so that its rider had to jump down from the saddle to avoid being thrown. The man landed on his feet and fired his rifle as rapidly as he could work the lever.

While bullets whined past the tree Ben wiped his mouth and said, "Hit a horse, dammit. Guess he's only stung, though, the way he's actin'. The bullet drop of one of these guns is bad when you got to reach out a long ways. Well, there they go, scattered for what cover they can find. In about ten minutes they'll have us surrounded and this'll be one warm place to be." He looked at Mark with mocking expectancy. "Got any bright ideas?"

CHAPTER IV

The Eastern Way

MARK'S thinking was still locked upon the strange-seeming fact of the interest of the strange riders in Chet Vard. If they weren't the wideloop outfit, who would they be? This was a new facet of a thing that had been a puzzle from the beginning. He heard the hoof beats of a horse moving in the gully. Not an aimless sound, made by a tired animal shifting about in search of rest. That horse was being ridden, and it was coming swiftly nearer. Twisting around, he saw Allie Lowman's tense face looking up at him.

"Mark!" she called guardedly. And when he merely stared, astonished by her presence out here, she repeated, "Mark. Please—I must talk to you."

Leaving Ben Clayton, Mark rolled himself to the edge of the gully and slid down its side, boots loosening small rocks that clattered to the bottom. Allie had on a divided riding skirt and a wool shirt that must have belonged to her husband. The gully was deep enough to conceal her, but this was no place for her to be. Mark grasped the reins of her mount—one of the livery nags, and far gone after the run it had made—and turned the animal around.

"Ma'am, you shouldn't have come here. There's trouble. Go back down the gully as fast as you can."

"Mark, I'm not a child. I could see and hear them, but I had to warn you that. . . . Oh, there's so much! I've never felt sure enough of anyone to confide, but tonight I was about to tell *you* when Mr. Clayton came in. Mark, after you left town another man rode out hurriedly. A man I've been watching for a long time, one I've always suspected, although I never could find a real reason for that. He didn't follow you, but he did swing toward the higher country. By the time I had

changed clothes and got a horse he was out of sight, but I was lucky enough to see two riders far off in the distance that I thought it must be you and Mr. Clayton. So I took the chance and came up here. Mark, he must have sent those others."

"Who was that man, Allie?"

"John Cassiter."

Cassiter. Here was the answer to many things. Mark told himself he was a fool for not having thought of it before. A ready market for stolen cattle. A shrewd interest in the hay business, which might by price-gouging be turned into something really lucrative. A man who wanted money and wasn't particular how he got it. Mark had to find out more, but there wasn't time for that now.

He called, "Ben, we've got to get Mrs. Lowman out of here!"

"Couple of 'em are circling around," the old man's voice reported. "If we're going to jump at all we better do it quick." He fired a couple of shots, then came down the wall of the gully.

In saddle once more, they pounded downslope, Mark and the old man placing themselves behind Allie. Almost at once they heard shouts behind them. Then, as the walls of the gully dropped away to leave them in the open, rifle bullets whined past. The shots were fired by men atop running horses, however; the odds against being hit were better than they seemed.

Ben looked at Allie's horse, and said, "That'n won't last."

That was true. But even one of the better mounts, if forced to carry double and held to the pace which now was necessary, would soon collapse.

"Abandoned ranch over there," Mark said. "We can fort up."

"About all we can do now," Ben agreed, pulling rein. "I'll hang back and slow 'em up awhile."

ALLIE glanced around as Mark ranged up beside her, and headed her mount over to the new direction. "He's —staying behind!" she gasped.

"Yes. We're rough people out here, but theres' some good in us."

The look she gave him was a strange one.

He fell slightly behind her once more, protecting her with his body while they raced to the buildings of the abandoned ranch.

The house was a single-story affair, stout-walled, but with all its windows stoned out by kids, so that Mark's boots grated on shattered glass when he moved about within the rooms. Not too good for purposes of defense, but better than nothing. He heard old Ben come pounding into the yard and, glancing through a window, saw Ben gather the two loose horses and take them to a barn. The old-timer had a head on his shoulders; they might be needing those horses again, once the animals were thoroughly rested.

Placing Allie against an inside wall, Mark told her to lie down on the floor. Then he tramped through the house, looking it over. The kitchen was empty—not even a cast-iron stove that might have been used to barricade a door. In one of the rooms there was a wooden bed-frame, but that was useless.

Ben Clayton came running into the house just as the other riders reached the yard.

"Scatterin' theirselves out," Ben reported, stepping to a window. "Wup—one of 'em's riding away. To fetch more help, I'd say."

Ben's left arm hung oddly. Mark went over to him and saw, in the faint cold radiance that reached in from the brightly moonlighted yard, that the cloth of the old man's sleeve was torn, and soaked with blood.

"Ben, you've been hit!"

"Nicked is all. Had worse and lived to brag on it."

There was a sound of Allie getting to her feet. While Mark shoved Ben away from the window she turned her back to them and lifted her skirts. Cloth made a small rending sound.

"Ben," she commanded, "come over here and sit down."

While Allie removed the torn shirt and turned dirty underwear down from the old man's bony shoulder, Mark circulated through the house once more, watching the yard front and back. Ben had been right. The men outside had taken cover and were waiting for something.

When Mark returned to the front room where the others were, old Ben was on his feet and buttoning his shirt, its sleeve now swollen by a bandage.

"This here one, now," Ben said, "could be a real Western woman if she set her mind to it."

"Oh, I already have," Allie said, smiling.

Ben regarded her shrewdly. "When a woman makes up her mind like that, generally it's on account of some man or other."

Allie didn't reply to that. But her dark eyes gave Mark a sidelong flicker of a glance, quickly stifled, that made his heart leap. Still, it might not mean anything at all. Mark Dorban had known his share of women and had learned that a man could be badly fooled by them.

Roughly, he said, "They've quieted down outside, Ben. Gives us a little time. You keep an eye out from here and I'll watch the back of the place."

He took Allie's arm and conducted her into a room which had been a bedroom, and placed her against the wall.

He glanced outside. No one was in sight. He saw only the gaunt tower of a windmill and, farther up the slope and over behind the barn, a group of fairly big rocks that the discouraged rancher had not bothered to remove.

"All right," he said to Allie, "what's this about John Cassiter? And what was it you were going to tell me there in town when Ben interrupted you?"

BUT when she drew breath to answer him he lifted a hand. Because a man who had recently been shot at could be recklessly bold he stepped over to her.

"Wait a minute. Something I want to do first." He took her in his arms and started to kiss her.

She stiffened. She didn't say anything and she didn't need to; he could sense her angry resentment. She would be thinking that it was typical of a rough man to take advantage of this crude opportunity to make love to her.

His hands fell to his sides. He felt like a fool. "Forget it. Go ahead, please."

"Mark, I—" Her voice sounded strained. This room was nearly dark, so that her face was a pale oval, looking up at him. "Oh, I don't blame you for what you were thinking. It's what everyone has been thinking and saying. It seems that in this country young widows are actually *expected* to remarry almost at once. Some even take lovers, while they're looking around, as Mrs. O'Reilly puts it! If a woman chooses to wait there must be something wrong with her. Either that, or she's being clever about it, so they go ahead and gossip anyhow."

"Allie, don't blame people too much," Mark urged earnestly. "A man can get killed by a cattle stampede or a mean horse if not by a gun, at any time. And a ranch woman can be old at thirty. If they live fast, that's to be expected. And as for gossip, there's not much else to be found in the way of entertainment."

"I suppose so. But it's all so ridiculous and—crude. Ord Tremaine visited me many times, at night because that was the only way we could talk privately. That office of his, with only a thin partition between it and the barber shop. . . . Well, I had hired him, to find out who was responsible for my husband's death. Not just the name of the man who fired the shots, but the one responsible for it all. Hugh had a theory, Mark—the cattle stealing wasn't merely the work of a few disgruntled cowboys who wanted to get even with someone, he thought, but something well planned and executed. There had to be a boss. He was working on that when he was killed. He had hoped to catch one of the thieves in the act and force him to talk. Mr. Tremaine believed that my husband's theory was right, and he was enthusiastic about it from the first. As a lawyer, he had ways of getting information about people, and he kept say-

ing he was getting closer to the man we were after."

"Getting closer, but never quite going the whole way," Mark said cynically, remembering the sort of man Ord Tremaine had been. "He kept needing a little more money, eh?"

"Why, yes, he did. Mark, do you mean—"

"He was bleeding you, making a good thing last."

She was silent for a long moment. Then, "Perhaps he was," she said. "But he was skillful about it, always keeping my hopes up. I suppose I was gullible, and a fool, but I was so eager to get proof—"

"How about Cassiter? Where does he come into it?"

"Mark, please don't laugh, but that was woman's intuition. Hugh was mildly suspicious of Cassiter, but he suspected everyone, even you. It was his job. Cassiter seems to enjoy looking like a badman, but he never goes to the saloon to mix with the cowboys. He keeps away from them a little too carefully, I think. Oh, it's thin, but can it be that he doesn't want anyone to suspect that he has dealings with them? He could get the stolen cattle cheaply and make a big profit, couldn't he? He might be the one who runs things, actually tells the men what to do!"

"Might," Mark conceded.

HE WAS thinking of the promptitude with which the cattle thieves had got into action against him. No, it wasn't any hit-or-miss proposition. Someone had cracked a whip. And then, hearing old Ben's limping steps in the doorway of the bedroom, he turned quickly.

"Somebody sneaking in on us," Ben reported.

The shooting started up before Mark reached the front-room windows. He saw guns flame reach out from a clump of bushes, not aimed toward the house but toward one of the numerous small gullies that cut the yard. Without thinking, he threw a shot into that brush and saw it twitch violently in the moonlight. No more shooting came from there.

Other shots were being fired from points beyond Mark's range of vision. The bullets kicked up spurts of dust along the edges of the gully. He heard an angry yell, then saw a man emerge from the shadowed gully, close to the house, and make a stooping, plunging run toward the structure. Mark's gun lifted and fell into line, thumb clicking the hammer back. But then his finger eased suddenly on the trigger.

He knew that raw boned figure, with its shock of rebellious hair that would be red in better light. Chet Vard had always disdained barbers.

Chet's boots thudded on the porch just as Mark flung the door open for him. Chet came through, and bullets splintered the sills before Mark slammed the heavy panel shut again.

"What the hell's going on here?" Chet demanded.

"That," Mark said, "is a large question. What fetched you?"

"I heard the shooting up there near the mine, and climbed the side of the canyon to take a look. Couldn't be sure who it was, but I had a notion it might be you. Then when I saw the lady I figured I'd better come down. I'd lamed my horse getting out of Hatchet last night, and was waiting for him to get better so I could start across the mountains."

"That would have been a dandy idea," Mark said sourly. "Did it occur to you that it might be just what somebody was hoping you'd do, practically admit that you'd gunned Tremaine? If there was another somebody, kid—"

Chet made a small and angry sound. Except for that, the whole place was silent. Those outside, having failed to keep Chet from reaching the house, now seemed content to settle back to their waiting.

"How low you think I am?" Chet demanded.

"I'm wondering, kid. You beat up an old man. And admitted as much to that tinhorn sheriff."

"All right, I gave Tremaine a lacing.

Mark, I lost my head that time. I was crazy."

Mark nodded slowly, understanding how that had been. Chet's hot male blood and Chet's temper. Desire for a woman could rob any man of what good sense he owned, and Allie Lowman was a beautiful woman. Chet had listened to the gossip about her and had been overly influenced by it.

"How crazy were you, kid?" Mark asked. "After the beating, what?"

"Why, I took my hay load out to the Bradded L Diamond, and was pitching it off when that fool sheriff came at me. I took his gun away from him and hit him with it, and stole the saddle horse I've got now . . . . Mark, I couldn't do anything else. Things looked too bad against me."

"You delivered the load in the middle of the night?"

"It was—something to be doing," Chet said.

Then he became aware of Allie's presence. She had come out of the bedroom and was standing with her arms folded.

Chet said, "Hello, Allie."

"Hello, Chet."

CHAPTER V

Fort or Trap?

NOW Mark knew how it had been. Chet had been turned down by Allie, and the thought that she preferred the attention of an old man like Ord to him had been too much for the kid. But a man running away from a killing didn't do so on top of a load of hay. People—including Lew Reed—should have thought of that.

There still remained Ed Frakes. Mark asked, "How about Ed?"

"Well, what about him?"

"You don't know?" Mark said.

"Know what? Look, I tried to keep the old cuss from going around to the saloons and drinking with the cowboys in hopes of prying something out of them. But you know how Ed is. He was bound he'd help me out, and he had that idea that cowhands who don't work any more have got to be rustlers, and that the rustling must be in back of everything that's happened. A fool notion, I told him. Besides getting him back on the bottle it might even . . . He didn't get in trouble, Mark?"

"He got in trouble. He was pistol-whipped and left for dead in his kitchen. Just after you left him last night."

"My God!" Chet said in a hollow voice. "How is he?"

"Bad off, kid. Wiswell is doing his best."

Without having been told to do so, old Ben Clayton had been watching things at the back of the house. He came out into the front room now, saying:

"Howdy, Chet. . . . Mark, do we just wait around till they get together enough help to come in here after us?"

The old man was right. This place had been hastily chosen as a refuge, a fort for Allie's protection. Like every fort it could be turned into a trap for those inside.

"Chet," Mark asked, "where's your horse?"

"Out there a ways. Worse lamed than ever, after the run down here."

"Makes it dandy," old Ben put in acidly. "Two tuckered horses and two no-good ones, four people." In the gloom he cocked a look at Mark. "Well, bucko?"

Allie stepped forward. "You're not to let my being here influence you in any way. I'm a good rider, and I'll take my chances. Surely they wouldn't shoot a woman."

"A bullet doesn't have eyes, ma'am," Mark pointed out shortly. "They might shoot at us and hit you instead."

Ben had moved over to the windows. He turned from them quickly, saying, "No use arguing about that now. Yonder comes the rest of 'em."

Five riders were dismounting well beyond sixgun range. Counting off the one

who had gone to fetch them and probably had met them along the way, that made eight men in all.

One of the new arrivals was a big man who held himself very straight. Mark couldnt' be sure of the man's identity at this distance, but he could guess. He waited while the riders moved prudently into a gully along which they could get nearer the house in safety. Then he put his hands up to his mouth, forming a sort of funnel, and shouted:

"Cassiter!"

There was no answer at first. Chet Vard gave a low exclamation and asked, "What's Cassiter got to do with this?"

"Maybe nothing. I'm doing some fishing." Mark called Cassiter's name once more, and waited.

This time there was a reply, not in Cassiter's voice. "What would you want with him if he was here?"

"He's with you. If he isn't, tell me why you wideloops are so steamed up about bothering us."

Another wait. Then John Cassiter's voice called, "Dorban?"

"That's my name." Mark gave Allie a meaningful glance.

"Cassiter here. I'm coming in, friend. Want to talk with you."

"Come alone, then, and unarmed."

THERE was another wait, a long one this time, during which Chet fidgeted and finally said in a puzzled way, "Cassiter, with that bunch? I don't get this at all."

"Running the show, is my guess," Mark told him. "A little more than that, too. He's in hot water now and he's using the boys to pull him out of it. I've got news for you, kid. Mrs. Lowman had hired Ord Tremaine to find out who it was that got her husband killed. I'd say that Tremaine found out, all right, but kept stringing her along. Why? Just for what she could pay him, or for the chance to shake some real money out of Cassiter in return for keeping quiet about his being the wideloop boss?"

Allie gasped. "Blackmail? Then Cassiter killed Mr. Tremaine to stop it! Oh, if I had a gun I'd—"

Mark cut her off. "We're piling the guesses pretty high, ma'am. If we're right, Cassiter is our man. But we'll hear what he has to say."

Cassiter came walking toward the house, openly, and with unhurried stride. He was close to the structure before those inside discovered that he had not come alone but had someone following him, so closely that the second man had been concealed by Cassiter's broad body until now.

Ben Clayton swore and cocked his gun. Mark called out harshly, "I said alone, mister!"

Cassiter stopped with one polished boot on the lowest of the porch steps. The man with him stepped to one side. That man was small, but he had a wiry, boot-tough look. He carried two guns and kept his hands on them without making any attempt to draw them as yet.

Cassiter chuckled in friendly fashion and said, "Merely a matter of insurance, friend. I'm meeting you a little better than halfway, I think, and you're hardly in a position to dictate terms. Kennedy, here is fast with those guns of his. You've got the drop on us, of course. You might be able to cut down both of us, but perhaps not. It would be a chancy thing, eh? So perhaps we can talk without gunplay."

Mark stepped out onto the porch. Sagging, sun-curled boards creaked under his weight. "Go ahead and talk," he said.

Cassiter's mouth, shaded in the moonlight by the low-cocked brim of his hat and by his heavy mustache as well, made a brief smile.

"You're one of those smart ones, Dorban. You guessed I'd be out here. What led you to make that guess?"

"I saw you get off your horse."

"I was fairly far away."

"I've got good eyes, friend."

"All right. We'll speak plainly, Dorban. You've got the Lowman woman with you, eh? You may take her and leave, with safe conduct to town."

"Real generous of you," Mark said.

"But what does that buy *you?*"

"Why, a partnership in that hay business of yours." Cassiter smiled once more. "Properly managed, it could make you a wealthy man within a short time. And the lady, I understand, is not exactly the distant sort. Perhaps you could overlook certain matters and—"

"Leave off that. Friend, you're running a bluff. You're wanting to split us up, I would say. Once I leave here, what?"

"Nothing, so far as you're concerned. Vard is a known killer and a fugitive. That boy we want, friend."

"Why?"

Cassiter shrugged. "Does that need explaining? Lew Reed doesn't amount to much, so it was my duty as a citizen to do what I could. I was able to find some capable men—"

MARK interrupted, "Handy, wasn't it, your knowing exactly where to find them in a hurry, and their being willing to strike out just on your say-so. A man would almost suspect—" He bit off the words, remembering that he had to get Allie out of here at almost any cost. He couldn't send Chet Vard with her, but perhaps old Ben was the answer. Some sort of deal might be made to permit Ben to escort Allie to safety.

Ben himself blew that up. The oldster had followed Mark onto the porch and now he said angrily:

"You two-bit snake, Cassiter! I can put up with a man that does his dirty work right out in the open, but one that sneaks around and then jabbers about his duty as a damn citizen—well, hell! What you're doing is covering up for your gunning of Tremaine. You've got to take Chet in—dead—so's he can't ever talk and prove he wasn't the one who done it. Well, they's some others of us that *can* talk now! Did you belt Ed Frakes just in order to make Mark go after Chet, or was it partly because you was scared Frakes had found out something? And who was it gunned that greenhorn sheriff, Lowman, for you, hey?"

Cassiter's face took on an ugly look, then composed itself. "You folks have been doing considerable guessing," he said thinly.

And because the harm had been done now, Mark said, "It seems to strike home, friend."

Cassiter's hand brushed back the side of his long coat, exposing the gun he carried, but not yet touching it. "I take it your answer is no. . . . Come, Kennedy."

The two of them backed away. Old Ben, who had his gun tilted up, gave Mark a hopeful look that was extinguished when Mark said, "It fixed things up good, your letting him know that we're wise to him."

Ben started visibly and wiped his left hand down a gaunt cheek.

"My big mouth," he said ruefully. "Well, do we just let 'em stroll away like this?"

"We made a bargain. We'll keep our part of it."

"Better be getting back inside then. Hell will pop just as soon as Cassiter gets back out there and sends word around."

Inside the house once more, Mark closed the door behind him. Chet Vard was crouched alertly behind the low sill of a window. Allie still was standing by the bedroom doorway, running her hands nervously up and down her arms.

Ben said, "Well, do we just sit an' wait for it?"

"Moon'll be going down after awhile," Chet Vard offered.

"Ben," Mark said, "it's going to be up to you to get Mrs. Lowman away from this. As soon as it's really dark Chet and I will break out. They'll come after us, giving you a chance to get those two good horses from the barn and light out. Do it fast, Ben, when the time comes."

"No!" Allie cried. "I'll not go, I'll not have you risking yourselves on my account. It's my fault that you're in this trouble, and I—"

"It isn't anybody's fault but John Cassiter's," Mark said gently, and glanced out through a window. "Right now he's one scared man, even though he doesn't let it show. That kind is bad medicine. Better

get down again, ma'am, and lie low."

As Mark had been expecting, guns outside began to speak now. Bullets thudded into the walls and doors and tore wood from window sills. One, screeching vibrantly, glanced from a porch post and came into the house, knocking dust from a down-hanging strip of ceiling paper. Chet Vard swore and fired rapidly. Old Ben started for the rear of the house but halted to inquire:

"We got the shells for that fool kind of shooting?"

THEY didn't have. Mack, who carried his gun but seldom, had only a dozen-odd cartridges in his belt. Chet Vard, looking up at him in sudden silence now, had about the same number. Old Ben had a beltful, but his gun was a .44, using different ammunition than the other two. Having put across his message the old-timer snorted and tramped into the bedroom.

One rifle after another fell silent, finally. They had to stop to reload some time. And against the sudden ringing silence, there came a new and persistent sound—a thudding. Then a protests of rusty nails being pulled from wood.

It came from the barn.

Ben yelped, "Mark, they must be breaking into the stable from the other side, to get our horses! The shooting was done to keep us from noticin' what was going on. By hell, I'll put a stop to that!"

Ben came running through the house, and before Mark could leap up to stop him he was out through the front door.

He didn't get far. A rifle crashed out a shot, and Ben's slight body seemed to leap into the air. He fell and rolled a few yards down sloping earth, coming to rest against a bush.

Allie was scrambling to her feet when Mark handed her his gun. Then, following Chet, he darted outside.

Both could get killed now. The only thing that saved them was the fact that the moon was going down behind the Stanley Hills, over beyond Hatchet town, so that the light was getting bad. That, and the added fact that they moved fast and kept their bodies close to the ground. They got hold of old Ben, Mark lifting his shoulders and Chet his legs, and they lugged him into the house. Bullets reached all around them, some jerking at Mark's clothing and one exploding a shard of glass that remained in a window sash. Then they were inside again, placing Ben gently on the floor.

It wasn't any mere nick that Ben had this time. The sound of his breathing revealed that. After warning the others to keep down Mark struck a match on the worn boards of the floor, and found that the bullet had passed through the right side of Ben's body just below the front ribs.

Before the match flickered out Ben opened his eyes and said weakly, "I'm getting to be a damn hoodoo."

"Quiet." Mark said, and flipped away the dead match. By feel, he found that part of Ben's shirt and underwear already were soaked with blood. He was cutting the cloth away when other hands interfered with his, and he saw Allie on her knees opposite him, brushing her hair back from her face with one hand.

"Mark, let me," she said, and handed him his gun.

Chet had gone out into the kitchen. He returned now, saying, "They got the horses, all right. Pretty dark out there, but I could see them being led away down the slope. Too far for this thing to reach." He spun the cylinder of his gun. "Me for a rifle, after this. Mark, this is bad."

"It's bad, kid."

"Well, I'm not standing around any longer." Chet's voice rose to a pitch of excitment. "I'm going out there and blast a hole you and Allie can get through. You bring back the doctor for Ben, eh?"

"Kid, you're jumping at things again. What would we use for horses?"

"Take a couple of theirs!" Chet said wildly. "I'm the one Cassiter wants and I'll keep him busy long enough for you to—"

"No good. We don't know exactly where their horses are, and with only starlight

to go by we couldn't find them in time. And don't be fooling yourself about Cassiter. He's got to shut all of us up now, if he's going to be safe."

Chet swore, but went over to crouch at a window. "Hey, you can see the lights of town from here. If he was to set fire to that barn, now, wouldn't people see it and come out to investigate?"

"You want to give Cassiter light to work by, and maybe the idea of burning us out of this house? Kid, you're getting light-headed. I'll think of something."

CHAPTER VI

A Prudent Man's Finish

IN the darkness, Allie was working over Ben Clayton, tearing more strips of cloth from her petticoats, and so Mark went out into the bedroom. He was in there, hunkered down at the window and testing and discarding one idea after another, when she came in.

Oddly, she closed the door behind her.

"Mark," she said quietly, "I've had enough of this. It's my responsibility, all of you being here. If I had confided in someone none of it would have happened. But no, I had to think I was crafty, and much smarter than ordinary folks. I wouldn't even trust Lew Reed, thinking that he was weak and worthless—"

"Quiet, girl," Mark said with dry humor. "This man is trying to think. I've about decided to go out and—"

"I'm not a girl, Mark, and you're not going anywhere. I've got Ben's gun in my hand, so stand out of my way. I'm the one who's going out, through that window, now. I'll find one of their horses and ride to Hatchet for help. I'm a good rider, really I am; I practiced on bridle paths before coming West."

"You'd never get near a horse. They'd see you and shoot you."

"I can crawl. It's dark enough outside now. Mark, please—can't you see that this is something I've got to do?"

Mark didn't say anything. He was scared, as any prudent man would be when a woman held a gun on him; anything could happen, excitable as most women were. He moved slowly toward her, and began talking in a soothing way.

"There's one thing about a gun—just waving one at somebody doesn't necessarily scare him, unless he knows you've got the will to shoot it. Have you got that, Allie?"

"Mark!" Her voice was ragged. "Ben may be dying! I'm desperate and I can't see well enough to make sure of only wounding you. Once I'm outside I'll be all right. I've got this gun and I suspect that rustlers are just like ordinary people, not wanting to be killed if they can help it. Certainly they've indicated as much by holding off so long." Her voice trailed away. She was aware, now, that Mark was very close to her.

She came at him like a wildcat, trying to get past him. He located the .44 with one hand, found it wasn't even cocked, and clamped his other arm about her to control her writhing, struggling body. A current seized both of them, bringing them together in breathless silence. His kiss was rough and demanding, letting her know the pent-up longing of a lonely man. And, after the first startled moment, the fervor of her response astonished him.

At last she drew back, "Now you know. Now you must be certain the gossip was right."

"I'm not even thinking about it. This is you and me. Allie, if you'll have me—"

"Oh, Mark, Mark!" She let him have the .44 and she put her face against his chest. "I've waited so long! It's about all a woman can do, just wait and hope that her man will some day take notice of her. And now I can't let you be killed on my account. Please let me go for help."

"Allie, no. You'd never make it." There was little time now. Cassiter would soon be making use of this darkness to move in. Raising his voice Mark called, "Chet, come here!" And when the door hinges creaked he said, "The lady has given me

an idea, and I'm going out to see if it'll work. Make sure she stays in here, eh? Allie, don't make him get rough with you."

HE FELT her body stiffen. "That wasn't a very fair method of getting your way!"

"Nope, it wasn't," Mark admitted, and chuckled. "But you Western women are a determined sort, hard to handle."

He gave the .44 to Chet and turned toward the window.

He was stopped momentarily when Allie's hand touched his arm, somehow conveying more meaning than words could have carried. Then he was going out through the narrow opening. He dropped noiselessly to the ground.

Mark Dorban went about this thing with no thought of mercy for those with whom he had to deal. He couldn't afford mercy, nor failure either. If he did fail, there wasn't much doubt about what it would mean for old Ben and Chet and Allie.

The night air was suddenly cold upon Mark's cheeks. The starlight was faint, so that objects on the ground seemed to loom up with an unnatural darkness and solidity, even when they were only brush and weeds. His boots tilted suddenly down and he jumped to the bottom of a gully that he had not even seen beforehand. He crouched that for a moment, mindful of the slight noise he had made and listening for reaction to it.

There was no sound save the distant yammer of a coyote.

From this low point he could see the skew-tilted wooden tower of the windmill that had been left on the place. Against the stars its blades were an oddly twisted mass, ruined by some storm, and the tail tilted far down. Where there was a windmill there would be a well; he moved toward it.

He couldn't hope to circulate around and, without creating a commotion to warn the others, find and take all those men one by one. He wanted one man, and to learn where that man was he had to stir them up. A risky thing, but a necessary one.

The windmill rod had been disconnected from the hand pump. Dry and oilless, the pump clanked and squeaked when he worked its handle. Cassiter and the others knew that he had a wounded man on his hands and they would readily believe he would take risks to get water.

He stopped, listening. A mans voice, near at hand, made a low call.

"Cass! One of 'em's at the well!"

"Take him, Kennedy," Cassiter's voice ordered from a distance. Then it shouted, "They're split up, boys! Go into that shack!"

Mark had only a few seconds to prepare himself before the dark figure of a man loomed suddenly at the windmill tower. But Mark was not at the tower any more; he was squatted down nearby in a clump of brush. The man at the tower looked about with a tense and ready eagerness, the long barrel of the rifle in his hands glinting faintly as he turned his body.

The man was facing the other way when Mark leaped up and struck with the barrel of his sixgun. Kennedy only grunted, staggered sideward on buckling legs and went down heavily before Mark could catch him and ease him to the ground.

Noise didn't matter now. From the front of the house came a sudden burst of gunfire and then the blurted cry:

"Cass, they're comin' out!"

"Gun them!" Cassiter's command was brief, but it was enough. Mark had been trying to fix the man's general location in mind; now he was certain of it.

He heard men running toward the house, and he regretted that. Chet was being impulsive again, trying to help by creating a diversion. Well, it *was* a help. Swift and Indian-quiet, stooping low and soon dropping into a gully that cut into sloping ground, Mark ran toward Cassiter's position.

FROM a mere voice he hadn't been able to pinpoint it exactly, but reason supplied the rest. Cassiter, a prudent

man, was far out, upslope from the barn. He would be among those rocks. Panting, Mark followed the gully until he was above the rocks and to one side of them. Breaking into the open he crossed over and descended.

Cassiter was not even aware of his approach. The big man had stepped partly from cover in order to watch the house and see what was going on down there. He had no rifle. He had nerve, however, of a sort; he made no sound at all when Mark's gun-muzzle found his back. He merely settled down onto his heels and turned his head slowly to look.

He must have recognized Mark by his build. "Damn you, Dorban," he said.

Mark brushed the side of Cassiter's coat out of the way and pulled the fancy sixgun from the holster. "This is it, friend," he said quietly. "Get down to the house, and fast."

Cassiter made a stumbling run, with Mark following at his heels and maintaining steady pressure with the gun-muzzle.

The remaining men formed a rough half-circle about the front of the house, judging from the flashes of gun flame that reached toward the structure from hummocks and clumps of brush. Chet's break-out must have been only a feint; at any rate he was not in the yard, and the front porch was empty. Mark knew a moment of fear when he wondered if Allie might have been hit and Chet had been forced to carry her back inside, then he shouted;

"Boys, listen! This is Dorban, and I've got Cassiter in front of me. He's not going to be getting money for you any more. You can go on with this, but he'll take any lead you throw my way, and you'll hang for complicity in murder. Or you can clear out. Which will it be?"

There was a silence. Then a wild yell from Chet Vard, who burst out of the house with leveled gun. "You're whipsawed, boys! Now make up your minds!"

Allie came with Chet, which was a foolish thing for her to do. Mark could just make out her straight, defiant figure, gripping old Ben's sixgun with both hands.

A man out in the yard blurted, "All right, it's a deal. Me and the boys have had enough of Cassiter's skinnin' us on beef prices, anyway, and threatening to turn us in if we don't toe the mark. We'll leave. . . ."

Allie and Mark were married by Judge Trefford, in the judge's chambers. The ceremony was supposed to be a private one but word had got around and almost everybody in Hatchet turned up, women sniffling and carrying on like they generally did on such occasions.

Allie was radiant, beautiful, proud-looking. It seemed like she was at home here now. She understood that there was good in these people, and that made here serene. Mark, in a stiff new suit, was uncomfortable and nervous as hell.

Ed Frakes was in the room, his head still bandaged. Doc Wiswell had pulled Ben Clayton through, although that had been a close thing, and Ben would have to remain in bed for some weeks yet, before he took up his new job as roustabout for Dorban & Vard.

Two of the rustlers had been shot dead, out there at the abondoned ranch that night a month ago. As close as Mark and Chet had been able to figure it, one had been killed by Mark at the beginning of the seige and the other had been killed by Chet. Mark had had some regrets about having to let the others go, but he'd really had no choice, and as Allie had said, Cassiter was the important one.

THE thing was, Kennedy hadn't been able to leave with the others. Lew Reed and a portion of his posse had showed up at the ranch just after the rustlers fled, and Kennedy, anxious to save his own neck, had started talking almost as soon as he regained consciousness. Kennedy knew everything. He had been in town the night Ord Tremaine died, and had seen Cassiter follow the attorney's buggy out of town on the road to the shack where Tremaine lived. As

(Concluded on Page 113)

BY GUN AND FANG

By PETE CURTIS

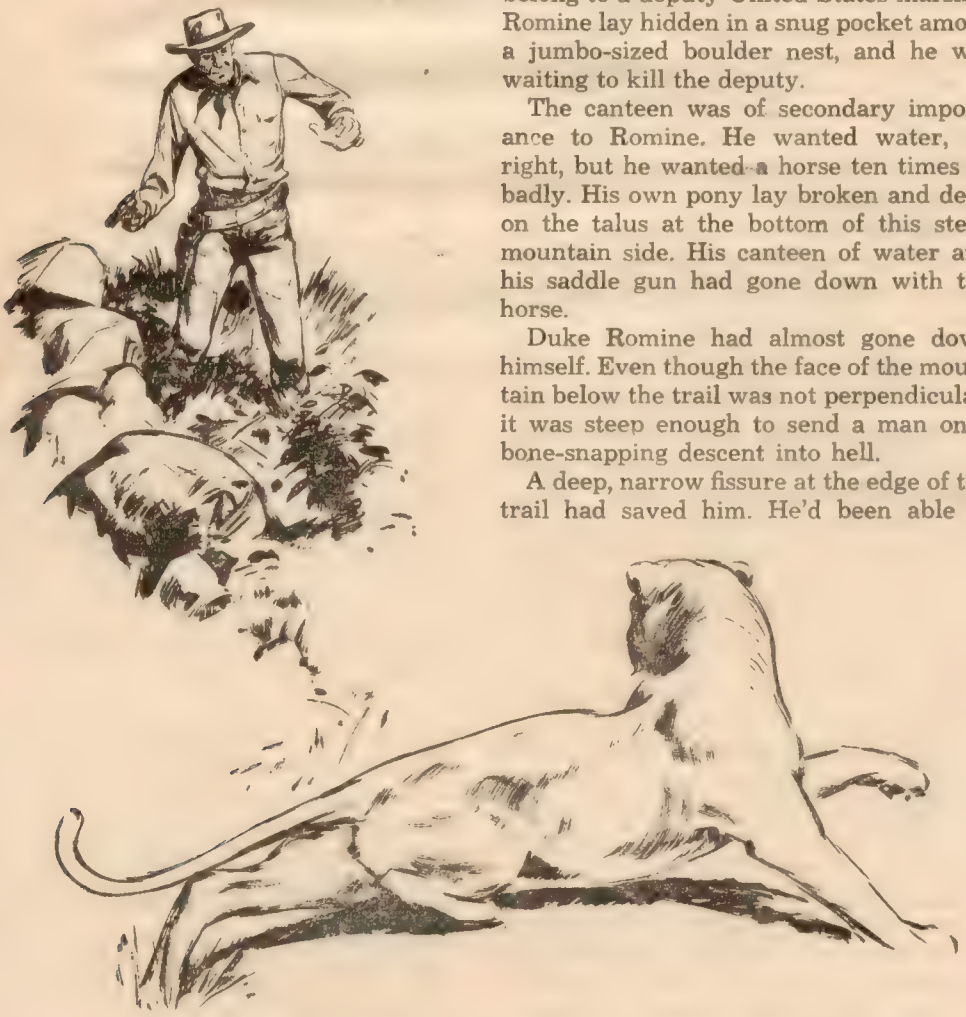
Even a careful back-shooter like Romine couldn't figure all the odds against him

DUKE ROMINE wanted a drink of water. His mouth felt like sun-dried rawhide, shrunken and stiff. Yet he wasn't too apprehensive. Water in a canteen would come along soon; the canteen would belong to a deputy United States marshal. Romine lay hidden in a snug pocket among a jumbo-sized boulder nest, and he was waiting to kill the deputy.

The canteen was of secondary importance to Romine. He wanted water, all right, but he wanted a horse ten times as badly. His own pony lay broken and dead on the talus at the bottom of this steep mountain side. His canteen of water and his saddle gun had gone down with the horse.

Duke Romine had almost gone down himself. Even though the face of the mountain below the trail was not perpendicular, it was steep enough to send a man on a bone-snapping descent into hell.

A deep, narrow fissure at the edge of the trail had saved him. He'd been able to



Slowly the big cat moved over the boulders and out of Romine's sight

brace himself in the V of the fissure and work his way back up, but it had been touch and go. Sweat had soaked his clothes and he'd been hollow-bellied and shaky. For a solid thirty seconds he had mouthed vileness at the big mountain cat which he hadn't seen but which had seen him, and whose blood-congealing scream had caused the horse to fall apart and pitch in wall-eyed frenzy over the side. That pony had been half bronc, with a loco streak, but for staying power on the long ride, Romine had never forked his equal.

The painter, Romine figured, had been surprised and angered at meeting enemies on a trail it used habitually for hunting forays. Retreating, but rankled, it had voiced its defiance to man and horse.

The shocking incident had left Romine in a bad fix. There was a lawman on his trail. He'd spied the man yesterday evening, a black dot cresting a rock-backed ridge at the same place he'd made crossing himself. It would of course be the deputy he had been told in Las Cruces was hunting him. This same lawman had been cutting his sign for six months, sometimes hot, sometimes cold. It had been a close brush in Las Cruces. The law wanted him bad. Romine was the only member of the Jack Burley gang rustlers and holdup gang still alive or free.

ROMINE'S cunning had not deserted him now. Even as he had escaped the death fall and was contemplating his grim outlook, it had struck him that having the deputy on his trail at this precise time and place was a windfall. The man had a horse, he had water, and with a bullet in his back he would be no further trouble. Those three things were necessary for an absolute safe flight.

As the fleeing outlaw figured it, the lawman would come along the trail, reading sign. He'd spot where Romine's pony prints ended, find the disturbed earth where the horse had panicked at the edge of the mountainside. He would be looking down, searching for a sight of Romine's battered hulk on the talus. Romine, from ambush, could plant his .45 slug into the man's back without even being seen.

That was what Duke Romine was waiting to do now. It was a far shot with hand gun from his rock hideout to the trail below. Only a top gun handler, sure of his gun and of his own prowess, could score at that distance. But Romine was one of the best, and he knew it.

Two hours he'd been waiting for that deputy marshal. He judged another two hours, three at the outside, would pass before his prey rode into the range of his gun. That was a long time to sweat under a burning sun without a drink of water.

Patiently Romine had given in to the prolonged misery of the vigil. But at last he was surprised to see a rider on the mountain side trail a good deal under the allotted time he had figured to wait. The deputy was a hound, a trail sticker. He'd sure eaten away the distance between them.

Any other time, Romine would have been alarmed at the lawman's rate of travel, but now he was pleased. It meant only that he'd have the horse sooner, that his dry, hard-swallowing throat would be relieved that much quicker.

His hand stole down to his side and lifted the ivory-butted .45 clear of leather. He checked the loads, squirmed a little to settle himself belly-down on the rocks, his worn boot toes bent and braced on solid foundation. He was primed to send the deputy to a happy hunting ground.

The lawman was not a young man. There was salt color to his bristle. A tough old law-dog, too damn persevering for his own good.

The crusted corners of Romine's mouth turned down bitterly. It had been a long, grim six months of running and hiding. Now it would end for a spell.

He watched the lawman stop where his, Romine's, pony had gone over the brink. The man was leaning forward, intently studying the sign. Romine slowly thumbed back the hammer of his Colt. He saw the deputy stand in stirrups and twist his body to peer down the mountain side.

Romine's roughened lips curled slightly in a knowing grin. Just the way he'd pic-

tured the lawman doing it. He judged distance and the degree of downslope, and adjusted his aim accordingly. He squeezed the trigger.

The shot ripped and cracked the heated silence apart. The deputy jerked and flung up an arm as he spilled out of saddle on the off-side. His horse, haunches lowered and forelegs stiff, shied away from the margin of the trail.

Romine had a glimpse of the lawman slipping over the brink. His lips compressed with satisfaction. Yet a moment later his narrow, hard face shaded with surprise. A hand and forearm were still in sight, clinging to the uncertain purchase of the trail's lip.

The deputy was in the fissure which had saved Romine's own life!

Leaving his bushwhack site warily, Romine dropped off the rocks, and with ginger steps advanced downhill toward the trail. Then he understood the freak thing that had happened, and relaxed perceptibly.

The deputy was not voluntarily holding himself in the fissure. The arm was caught at the elbow, in the narrowest part of the cleft. The star-toter was hamstrung there in death! Romine was no longer concerned about that deputy.

The man's horse held his full attention now. The animal was jogging back up the trail, stirrups swinging and flopping. A bend of the trail took it from sight.

ROMINE cursing under his breath, began to follow the horse. His thigh muscles pulled. It felt strange to be walking.

When he rounded the bend, he still could not see the horse. The trail lifted steeply here in a series of snake-turns. The outlaw kept on following the pony.

Gradually the terrain gentled a bit, and at last he spotted the horse cropping bunch grass above the trail.

Romine grunted, "Stay put."

He advanced slowly. Suddenly the animal wheeled and angled away, circling wide. It started jogging back down the trail, reins dangling free.

Romine stood with drooping shoulders. His voice was raspy when he cursed aloud, and his blood-shot eyes held to the canteen hanging from the saddle-horn.

Damn jughead! What in hell's the matter with him?

Again he started out after the animal. Shortly he found where the horse's prints left the trail, forking uphill. It was a rugged climb through brush and rock. Romine saw the horse a good distance above. A deep scowl rutted his dark brow. He could not figure why the horse would desert the trail for such a stiff climb.

He slogged his way up the acclivity. That saddled mount was all that could save him from an agonizing death.

Romine was blowing hard when he got to where the pony had ceased climbing and had changed to a goat-footed way parallel to, but high above, the trail. The outlaw stood spraddle-legged for a time, pulling in hot gusts of air. There was a raw burning in his throat. His thigh muscles ached and fluttered.

"Loco damn horse," he breathed harshly, puzzled, and a trifle panicky now.

He followed the trail of the horse winding through rock outcroppings. Above the site where he had gunned down the deputy, he held up and stared at the trail.

The painter was down there—the cat whose scream had caused his own horse to pitch down the mountain, and reason enough to make the deputy's horse act queer and jumpy.

The big mountain cat was tearing cloth and flesh away from the pinioned arm of the dead lawman.

Romine's eyes blinked slowly as he watched. That cat was hungry and frustrated. It couldn't get to the remainder of the body, and the forearm didn't satisfy the animal. The wicked teeth were closed on the mutilated arm, the sleek, tawny body hunkered down powerfully in the attempt to drag the deputy out of the fissure.

Suddenly the body of the lawman plummeted downward, hit the slide and tumbled and rolled. The big cat struggled desperately to catch balance at the very

edge, succeeding after a moment. It paced angrily back and forth along the rim, thwarted from an unprecedented meal.

Then it caught Romine's scent and the round head tilted as it looked uphill. The teeth bared when it spit and snarled, and the long tail switched. Slowly the big cat clambered gracefully over the boulders to go from Romine's sight.

A hungry painter; a wandering horse not far away . . .

URGENCY spurred Romine along the hoof trail left by the deputy's horse. There'd be hell to pay if that cat got to the pony before he did. The horse would stop to graze only when it no longer sensed danger from the cat.

Romine thought, Reckon that painter will keep a wide berth if I'm anywhere near the horse, and moved faster along the rough steepness. Hot, stabbing sensations hit his lungs and throat. His breathing was a series of grunts and rasps.

After a time the steep pitch of rock-studded terrain gave way to more easily accessible slopes of sage and juniper. Romine had difficulty breathing. He had to rest. It was then he saw the horse standing in the shade of brush and juniper trees.

The pony was looking back at Romine. The outlaw remained planted for seconds, unmoving.

The horse's head turned away and dropped sleepily. It took pleasure from the mottled shade it had found.

Romine's flat cheeks twitched. He started toward the horse, voice peculiarly soft while murmuring assurances.

Once again the animal swung up its head to look at the advancing outlaw, then resumed its indifferent, lazy attitude.

Romine's narrowed eyes glinted. This baby was his now. In seconds he'd have horseflesh under his legs, water in his gullet. And there would be no hounding tracker on his back trail.

"Easy, boy," Romine grunted. "Easy does it. There's sugar a-plenty where I'm going." His hand reached out and snared the reins.

He possessed them but an instant. They burned skin from his hand. The pony was suddenly a heaving mass of quivering bone and muscle. Breathing shrilly, it crashed away through the brush and trees.

Romine wheeled around in shocked surprise.

A tawny blur of fury and death was almost on top of them. The mountain cat was disdaining the man in its hungry quest for meat.

Yet it wasn't the horse the painter was bent on killing, Romine realized with a shock a split-second later. The powerful beast was headed straight for him!

In a flash Romine thought, Turned man-killer! The deputy's hide and blood in its jaws, and then my scent—

He didn't have time to get his gun free. The rippling, steel-muscled body bore him to the ground; fiery, slashing fangs and claws tore into his flesh.

Romine's screams drowned out the hellish snarls of the big cat.

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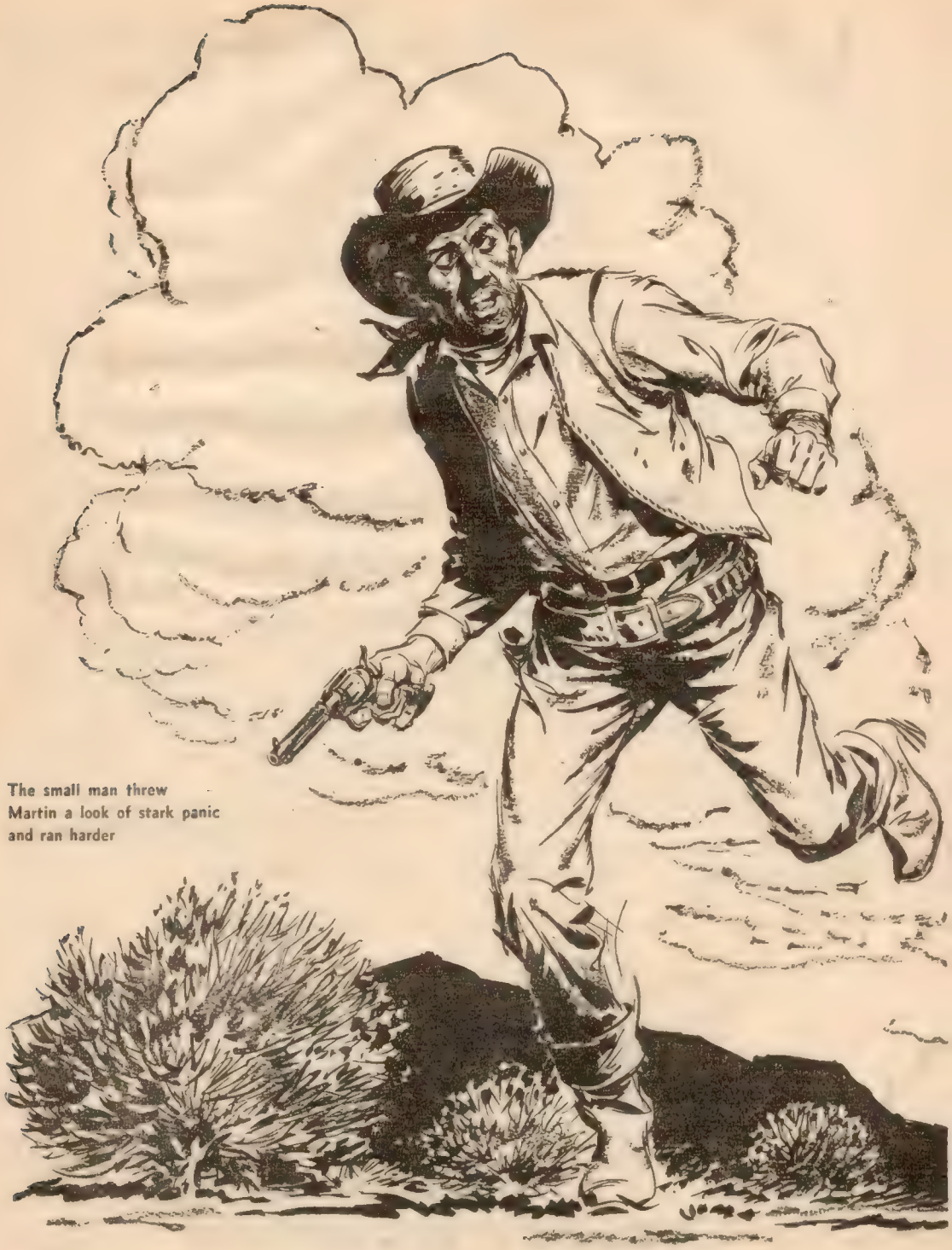


The small man threw Martin a look of stark panic and ran harder

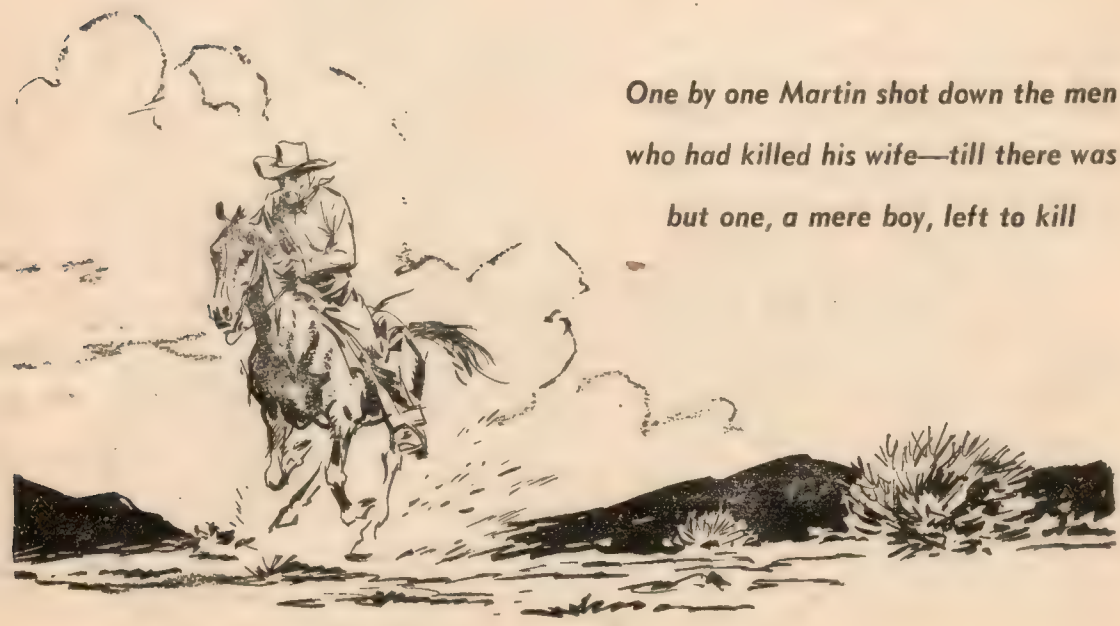
LONE-HAND POSSE

A Novelet by J. L. BOUMA

WHEN the posse stopped at Martin Mallet's place on the way back from hunting the three outlaws, they found Mary Mallet dead in the yard. They thought Martin would go crazy. Uttering a terrible cry he leaped from his horse. His hands shook when he touched the cold body of his wife, but his face was like stone. And in his eyes shone a light so wild and bright that men who were his closest friends and neighbors, shocked at sight of his raw grief, looked away from him.

The Mallets had been married a little over a year, and now had a four-months'-old son. Martin, a cowpuncher turned farmer, was a much respected member of the community. At twenty-four, he was a long, loose man with big hands and feet, reddish hair, and a cheerful grin. A man slow to anger. But when his anger did take over, it was a dreadful thing to behold.

Mary Mallet had been shot twice, through the body. In the dirt nearby, within touch of her outstretched hand, lay Martin's shotgun.



One by one Martin shot down the men who had killed his wife—till there was but one, a mere boy, left to kill

Sheriff Blount put a comforting hand on Martin's shoulder. "Come away, Martin," he said awkwardly. "We'll take care of things."

"Let me be!" Martin said fiercely, and knocked Blount's arm aside. He picked up his wife and carried her cold body into the log house. The baby wailed in the crib as Martin lowered the mother to her bed and covered her with the spread. He straightened then, and glanced at the crib as though something alien to his flesh lay there, then stalked out into the bright afternoon sunlight again.

"Martin, I want to say—" Sheriff Blount murmured, his tone, his manner, every move he made apologetic.

"Don't say it!" Martin shouted. Glancing at the other men in the yard he glared at them as he ordered accusingly, "Keep to the edge of the yard! Don't be trampling on what sign may be left!"

His five neighbors backed placatingly away without so much as glancing at each other.

"Martin Mallet, you listen to me!" Blount said in a sharper tone of voice. "There are three horses in your corral I've never seen before. Let's take a look at 'em."

MARTIN'S cold blue eyes touched the sheriff briefly. He started to stride toward the corral, but broke into a run before he reached it and swung the big gate open. Three horses stood dispiritedly at the water trough. Their coats were gray with dust and dried lather. Plainly they were done for.

"They took Mary's mare and my other two saddle horses," Martin said. He felt as if a cold wind had blown out the lamp that lighted his inner consciousness, and that now he was walking all alone through a dark world in which there was only himself and three horses.

He touched the horses, looked for brands; he rubbed dried lather between the tips of his fingers.

"Happened about four hours ago," he said. "Must've been the three fellers we were after. They swung wide where we lost their trail, remember, and they stopped here because they needed fresh horses."

He turned out of the corral, his eyes searching the ground. Suddenly he stooped and picked up to brass cartridge cases out of the dust.

"Winchester," he said tonelessly. He pointed out hoof marks, and boot tracks. "One of 'em stood here while the other two went inside after the horses. Mary came outside and wanted to know what they thought they were doing. She got the shotgun to threaten them, because she had plenty of spunk, and the one who was standing here shot her."

He looked north, then west, where ridge upon ridge of wooded hills buckled toward the mountains. South, and southwesterly, the land rolled away unbroken as far as the eye could see in the summer haze. Somewhere yonder rode three killers. Maybe. Martin tightened his hand and felt the sharp edges of the cartridge cases dig into his palms.

The sheriff said gently, "You'd best get to town. I'll look for sign until dark and see what I can find."

Martin did not answer; it seemed he had not heard. He harnessed his work mules to his wagon, and he padded the bed with all the blankets and quilts he could find, before carrying Mary's body outside.

Will Jameson, his nearest neighbor, came up to him and said hesitantly, "Jane and I'll take the baby for a day or two if you'd like, Martin." When Martin did not answer, Jameson gave Blount a questioning look, and shrugged.

Blount took Jameson aside. "See that the baby's all right, Will. You've got kids, so you know what to do. Find whatever stuff you need and put it with the crib in the wagon. Ride into town with Martin and take the baby to Helen Crawford. That little dressmaker and Mary were good friends all their lives."

Martin saw that plan being carried out as if a spectator from a distance. He watched as Jameson gently placed the crib next to the mother's blanket-wrapped body, and said nothing. Set and terrible

was his patience as he considered the time and distance that separated him from the three outlaws. Four hours. Or figure five. The stolen horses had been fresh. But time meant nothing at all. He had all the years of his life in which to find them. First, and most important, he must learn all he could about them.

He drove out of the yard, with Jameson on the seat beside him, and Jameson's horse tied to the tail-gate. The other men murmured condolences, but Martin only shook his head at them and refused to answer.

It was twilight when they drove into town. Martin stopped in front of Helen Crawford's dress shop. He said quietly, "I'll be grateful, Will, if you'll take the boy inside and tell Helen I will see her later."

Jameson nodded, for he did not know what to say. Martin had not said one word all the way to town—had only stared straight ahead.

After Jameson had tied his horse at the hitch-rack and lifted the crib out of the wagon, Martin drove on down to the funeral parlor and carried his wife's body inside.

Martin said to Higby, the undertaker, "The funeral will be at eleven tomorrow. Notify the preacher, and make all the arrangements necessary."

He walked out before Higby could gather his senses to answer.

Martin stopped then at the home of a middle-aged couple named Tanner, who promised to move out to the farm and look after things for free rent and what they could use and sell in the way of chickens and eggs and garden truck.

"I'm going away," Martin told them. "I don't know how long I'll be gone. Maybe a week, or fifty weeks, but I'll keep in touch with you."

The stars were out when Martin again stopped his wagon in front of the dressmaker shop. The shop was in darkness, but he could see lamplight in the rear, where Helen had living quarters. He rapped on the door.

An inner door opened and he saw Helen's slender figure silhouetted against the light. When she came through the dark shop and saw his hard-edged face she moaned:

"I don't know what to say, Martin."

"I know how you feel, so there's no need. Is the boy all right?"

"He's fine, Martin. Do you want to see him?" She took his arm, a tall woman who bore her grief with mature composure. "Come inside, Martin."

He followed her into her small sitting room and looked at the big china lamp on the round table.

"I want you to take care of him while I'm gone, Helen."

"You're going away?"

"Didn't Jameson tell you what happened?"

She nodded, face pale, eyes searching his eyes.

"They are the same three who held up a stage-coach on the Rincon road," Martin said. "I'm sure of it. Sheriff got word early this morning that they were heading this way. I was in town to pick up a roll of wire and joined the posse. We tracked 'em as far as Horse Creek and lost 'em. They must've doubled back, knowing we were on their trail, and they needed fresh horses. I'll be going after them tomorrow."

"Martin, please—"

"Will you take care of Bobby?"

"Of course. If that's what you want. But, Martin, do you need to go?"

"I need to very much, Helen."

She took a shaky breath and turned away. "What sadness! What a thing to have happen." She swung back to him and said fiercely, "Don't go! The law will—"

Her words irritated, rather than angered him. He said, "Stop it!" And then, "I'll see you in the morning, Helen. Good night."

He stopped by the sheriff's office, but Blount had not yet returned. Martin met him on the way back to his farm. He heard trotting hooves on the packed road, then saw the rider coming in the bright starlight, and stopped his team.

"Blount?"

Ed Blount reined over to the wagon.

"Martin," he said. And then, "Well, it wasn't much. Tracks leading south, and that can mean nothing and everything. Nearest town in that direction is Bilcox, forty miles away. A few ranches and stage stops in between. After that you get desert, and plenty of it. The way it figures, they're plenty scared because of what they done. So they headed south because there's no telegraph station in Bilcox, no way to head 'em off."

"Do you know any more about 'em than you did this morning?"

"No. They were masked, of course. One fellow was tall and had blond hair. The other two were medium sized. I'll send out a couple of telegrams tonight. Maybe we'll know more by morning." Blount hesitated. "You're fixing to go after them? Right?"

"Yes."

"You want me to deputize you? Make it legal?"

"When I find them I'll kill them, Ed. Now do you still want to deputize me?"

"Forget it for tonight," Blount said gruffly. "Better get some sleep."

Martin drove on to the farm in the bright starlight . . .

THE next day was hot. Martin Mallet, hat in hand and dressed in his black town suit, heard the droning of the preacher's voice as men lowered the pine box into the earth. Something tore in him. A cry then rose like the bleat of a sheep, and lodged in his throat. He lowered his head, closed his eyes, and tried to pray.

Then it was over. Martin took Helen Crawford's elbow and led her at once to the rented buggy he was driving. He had made his final arrangements that morning, and now felt an urgent need to be on his way. Then answers to Blount's telegrams had told him no more than what he'd already knew. Only that the horses the men had been riding were stolen horses. And that, during the holdup, one of the smaller men had spoken with a pronounced lisp.

When he stopped in front of the dress shop, Helen said anxiously, "Do you have to go now? Won't you stay for dinner?"

"No, Helen."

"You have to say good-by to Bobby. You haven't even seen him today."

Martin sighed. "It won't do any good," he said. "Right now the boy doesn't mean anything to me, so it won't do any good to see him."

She stepped down from the buggy. "You'll write?"

He promised, and drove on to the livery stable. An hour later, in range garb, riding a black gelding and leading a pack-horse, he rode out of town and struck southward in the direction of Bilcox . . .

It was dusk when Martin Mallet saw the lights of a stage station ahead of him. A purple haze had settled over the desert, and early stars pocked the lavender sky. To the west lay a low range of sand hills the color of plums. A wagon road across from the station led toward them.

A Mexican in the white clothes and straw sombrero of a peon opened the gate as Martin approached the station with its surrounding wall of adobe.

Martin entered the gate and dismounted. "You take care of the horses, *amigo*?"

"*Si, señor*! Go inside. There is food on the table."

"Three men, three horsemen came through here yesterday," Martin said. "You see 'em?"

The Mexican averted his eyes. He shrugged gracefully. "Ask Señor Bradley. Maybe he know."

Bradley, a pudgy man with a fleshy face and small, hooded eyes, was in a large room with whitewashed walls, his thick elbows resting on a small bar. A Mexican woman in a black skirt with a red stripe at the bottom scurried past an inner door. As Martin crossed the floor, she came in with a platter of steaming potatoes which she added to the food already on the table.

Bradley looked carefully at Martin. He indicated the table with a movement of his head. "Stage due," he explained. "You want to eat?"

Martin nodded. "Give me a whisky."

Bradley placed a bottle and glass on

the table. He said, "I've seen you before. You're from around Challis, huh?"

"Farm there." Martin said. He took the drink neat. "Three riders come through here yesterday?"

"Mister, in my business a man keeps his own counsel."

"I want an answer, Bradley."

The fat man studied Martin. He looked into Martin's eyes. "That bad?" he asked.

"They killed my wife."

Bradley pushed away from the bar and took a long breath. "They came through here. In a hurry, too. Stayed just long enough to eat and water their horses, then kept going."

BRADLEY nodded. "But Juan—he's my Mex hostler—says they split up a ways along the road. He was out back where he could see 'em, and he says one of 'em took off for the mines by himself."

"You mean the Sand Hill mines?"

"That's right. Fifteen miles of hot country and you're there."

"What's on the other side?"

"The nearest town is Steeds. That's a helluva ways—thirty miles or more other side of the Sand Hill camp. But a man can make it if he takes plenty of water along."

Martin described the men, and asked, "You hear 'em say anything? Call each other by name, anything like that?"

Bradley pulled thoughtfully at his chin. "The one with the lisp they called Pinto. The big one—had a round birthmark on his cheek, as I remember—was called Cash. That's all I can tell you."

"Which one headed for the mines?"

Bradley gave a short laugh. "In this country, strangers on horseback all look the same at a distance."

Martin went out and spoke to Juan, but the Mexican hostler could not tell him any more. The stage came, and Martin ate. He checked his horses and slept in the stable. The sun was not yet up the next morning when he climbed in the saddle and headed toward the Sand Hill camp.

Before he left, Bradley came outside and said, "A man might think you'd be better off following the two of them than just one."

"I'll get them all in the end, all three of 'em," Martin said grimly.

"I believe you will, at that," Bradley said, and watched Martin ride away.

This was dry and arid country through which he rode now. He followed the wheel tracks through the sage and greasewood. Lizards slid out of his path and poised like miniature statues. The sun's rays hammered down, and the tracks wound slowly upward into rock-and-cactus country. Near noon, he heard the sound of a hoist, and in moments saw the gaunt structure at the foot of a wide wash. The mills and offices were nearby. There was a bunkhouse, a cook shed and a square, weather-stained building with a sign "STORE" above its door. A few mules and horses shared a pole corral to one side. Men moved here and there.

Martin tied his horses at the hitch-rack fronting the store and went inside. Work shirts and pants were piled on tables. The shelfs held canned tomatoes and whisky. A short, bearded man with a collarless shirt, smoking the butt of a cigar, rose from a table in back and looked at Martin.

Martin asked his question, and the fellow nodded.

"On the run, wasn't he?" the short man asked.

"You mean he's gone?"

"Came in late the other night and stayed over yesterday, on account of he bought himself a big drunk. Didn't leave until about an hour ago. You the law?" Martin didn't answer that. Instead he asked, "Which way did he go?"

The short fellow waved his hand. "Headed for Steeds."

"What did he call himself?" Martin asked.

"Pinto. Little man . . . Hey, where you going?"

"Watch my pack-horse," Martin said. "I'll be back."

He took off at a hard run, feeling cold certainty inside. He had not expected to be rewarded this soon. But Pinto was panicky—his getting drunk last night

proved that.

The trail swept downward through a notch in the hills. Beyond lay flat country, where heat devils danced. Within an hour Martin caught sight of Pinto riding his horse at a walk, slouched in the saddle, hat low over his eyes.

More than anything else, Martin wanted to question the man about his former companions. But there was no way to hide his approach. He galloped on, closing the distance. And sudednly Pinto came erect and peeled a look across his shoulder. He dug spurs then, and rode with his head turned to watch Martin.

FOR a few minutes the two horses gal- within two hundred yards of each other. Then, slowly, Pinto's mount drew away.

Martin reined his horse in with his left hand,while his right drew the rifle from scabbard. He jumped down and dropped to one knee, took careful aim and fired twice.

Pinto's mount went to its knees and flipped over on its back in a cloud of dust, throwing Pinto clear.

Martin leaped back into saddle and rode forward again.

He was a hundred yards away when Pinto staggered to his feet and began to run. Martin shouted at him. The small man threw him a look of stark panic and ran harder. He drew his gun as he ran and spanged two wild shots in Martin's direction.

When Martin spurred around the running man, though, then Pinto stopped. He stood there shaken with panic, then drifted a little to one side as if his legs refused to hold him. The pistol hung from his lax hand. His jaw worked as if he were trying to say something but was restrained by the fear that weakened him. His narrow, beard-stubbled face made Martin sick. Eyes rolled toward him in panic and the man croaked something and lurched back as Martin raised the rifle.

"All right, mister," Martin said softly.

Pinto screamed. He jammed the muzzle of his gun into his mouth and pulled the trigger.

A small red spray burst from the back of his head. Then his body went slack and he pitched forward on his face.

Martin looked away. He sheathed his rifle and rode over to the horse Pinto had been riding. He didn't have to look twice to recognize Mary's mare.

He sat still for a breath of time, his eyes closed. Then he threw Pinto's body across the little killer's own saddle, climbed up behind and rode back to the mines in the sweltering desert heat.

The heavy-set superintendent's name was Freeman. He said angrily, "Don't expect us to dig a hole for him. Bury your own dead, by hell!"

"I want you to do it," Martin said. "And tell Sheriff Blount about it next time you're in Challis."

"What you're saying don't mean anything to me," Freeman said, looking distastefully at the body. "Why the hell should I tell that lawman anything?"

Martin looked around at the circle of men in front of the store now. "Because I want the word spread," he said.

That was as much as he had an intention of saying. He reached for the reins of his pack-horse and rode away. Word of Mary's murder would be carried by every stage driver and teamster who passed through Challis. And the news that her husband had followed and killed one of the men responsible would spread like a brush fire. He had not bothered to explain the manner of Pinto's death to the superintendent, though to an observant man it should be obvious enough. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that wherever a man named Cash and his companion went they should hear that the husband of the woman they had murdered was on their trail. Martin wanted them to know. He wanted them to learn fear of every stranger who packed a gun, to flinch each time a door opened behind them. He wanted them to die a little before his bullets actually blasted them into the hereafter.

On his way back he stopped at Bradley's station long enough to water and

feed his horses. Bradley looked his question and Martin nodded.. It was enough. The next stage south would carry the news of what had happened at the Sand Hills mines.

That evening he rode into Bilcox, a town of adobes and Mexican *jacales*. Martin left his horses at the stable and made his rounds of the saloons. His questions brought shrugs, faint interest, curiosity. Two men. A big man with a mole on his cheek, who called himself Cash, and a smaller companion. Martin's eyes, his voice, demanded and received answers, but none were the answers he so desperately sought.

HE WENT to the town marshal, a stocky man named Morton. And after Morton admitted never having seen nor heard of the two men in question, Martin said, "Have you had any holdup complaints in the last day or two?"

Morton's eyes sharpened. "What's that got to do with it?"

"They didn't get a dime in that stage holdup, so they're likely broke. And while they're running they'll need money to live."

Morton nodded slowly. "The other evening a rancher was held up and robbed on the road west of town. Two masked men, one big and one small. Riding sorrels. They got only about twelve dollars."

"What's west of here?"

"A few scattered ranches and roadhouses and stage stations. There's Mexican Hat, near the Border, about a hundred miles west. Then nothing to speak of until you reach the Colorado."

It took Martin three weeks to reach the banks of the Colorado, and he knew then that either he had missed his quarry or had made a mistake in coming this way. He had stopped to ask his questions wherever men lived and worked, and none had remembered ever having seen Cash and a companion. Now, in Yuma, Martin stopped to rest his horses and to send Blount a telegram. The following day he had his answer:

Nothing new here stop Helen says you should come home stop I think the same thing.

Martin retraced his route eastward. Most of those he met knew him now, and knew whom he was after. Their answers were still the same: "Never saw 'em nor heard of 'em, friend. Try Mexican Hat. It's the only place of any size around these parts."

A week later Martin rode into the Border town. Here he learned from a dance hall girl that Cash was not a stranger to Mexican Hat.

"Could be he's not the Cash you're looking for, though," the small, dark girl with a tired prettiness about her told him. "This one calls himself Cash Haymes."

Martin sat with her in the cantina in the lamplight, while two Mexican youths strummed guitars on a small stage.

The girl watched him warily. She had not given the information willingly. Only the cheap brandy he had bought her and the sight of a half-dozen gold coins Martin had taken from his pocket had bought her grudging answers.

"Big fellow with a mole on his cheek?" he asked. She looked at the table and said nothing. "Used to ride with two pardners. One called Pinto. I forgot the other fellow's name."

She regarded him with suspicious eyes. "You came through here a couple of weeks ago."

"I didn't see you."

"I was sick, mister."

Martin clinked the coins in his hand. "How much will it cost me?" he asked softly.

"Is it true they killed your wife?" she asked.

"It's true."

"The other fellow's name is Jim Britt," she told him then. "He's just a wild kid, who needs a stronger man around before he can throw out his chest."

Martin's change from the drinks was on a cracked plate. He added a double eagle. Something in him trembled. The weeks of riding, of seeking, had worn him down to bone and sinew, and now nerves twanged in his flesh. The pounding of his

hatred he had grown heavier under the hot sun. He'd driven himself, afraid to stop. The thought had nudged him now and again during the nights that he was afraid to stop moving, afraid to return home and take up life where he had left it. Now he hesitated, and the odd thing was that he knew he would almost regret it when he did meet the men he sought, for then he would have no further excuse to keep moving.

MARTIN asked the dance girl, "When did you see them last?"

"About the time I took sick, not long before you came here. Pinto wasn't with them. But you killed him, didn't you?"

"Did they know I was after them?"

"Didn't say."

"Where did they go?"

She told him and he added two more gold coins to the plate. Then he went out and rode away in the darkness.

The town of Tora was a cluster of adobes in the coppery hills across the Border. Men who needed to get lost went there to hide out, or to join up with smuggling gangs or with outfits that drove stolen cattle across the line.

Martin arrived there next day. That is, he looked down on Tora from the brow of a hill. Then he found scanty graze near a spring in a hollow, and unsaddled and unpacked his horses and staked them out. He built a small fire and cooked a meal of beans and dried beef and coffee. When he had put the fire out he went to sleep in the shade of the mesquite.

It was dusk when he saddled his horse and rode away from his camp. He swung a wide circle and approached Tora from the south. In the early, star-studded darkness he walked his horse along the town's only street where lamplight was shining from the flat-roofed adobe houses. A lantern shed reddish light above the doorway of a cantina on the corner, and here Martin swung down and tied his horse. He checked his gun quickly and expertly, then stepped inside to see if he could find Cash Haymes and Jim Britt.

That happened so quickly and was so simple that he acted without thought. He did not know for certain what Cash Haymes looked like, nor had the outlaw ever seen him. Yet when a bony, blond man with hard eyes turned from the counter, whisky glass in hand, to see who had entered, Martin grunted and jerked erect.

The two men stared at each other for no more than an instant, during which others in the smoky, lamplit room—the half a dozen peons, the two tough-looking Americans who had been standing with Cash Haymes and who had instantly moved away—became mere shadows to Martin Mallet.

There was no doubt about it. The hunted and the hunter recognized each other immediately! The knowledge leaped between them as if across strung wires. And something else Martin knew with certainty now that Cash Haymes had fired the shots that killed Mary. The killer might as well have told him, for Martin knew it in that poised moment of silence that was broken only when Haymes went for his gun.

Martin had known what might happen and had been ready for anything. Cash Haymes didn't know, and wasn't ready. His hip struck the counter as he turned to make his draw. Martin's arm blurred. His Colt trained on Cash Haymes' chest.

He squeezed the trigger three times and moved a step forward at each shot.

His first bullet broke Haymes' shoulder, and the big man's half-drawn gun clattered to the floor. The second bullet ripped through the man's heavy belt and doubled him over, and the third tore through the side of his head as he fell.

The sound of the shots was still reverberating in the room when Martin turned his gun on the two Americans. He saw instantly that neither was the third man for whom he was looking.

He said harshly, "Where's Britt?"

One of the men jerked his head. "He's not here."

Martin moved away from the door, and his eyes swept the smoke-filled room quickly. "Where is he?"

"Damned if I know," the man said. His

companion cast one swift look at the back door, then looked at the floor.

"Toss your guns across the bar," Martin ordered the two.

AS SOON as they had obeyed, Martin crossed to the back door, lifted a boot and kicked it open. A lamp burned inside an adobe-walled room in which were a half-dozen bunks of rough lumber. Another door led into darkness beyond.

He ran out into an alley just as a horseman rode from a stable across the way.

"Hold it, Britt!" he called.

He fired twice, but missed, seeing only the vague shadow of the horse, and the rider low in the saddle. A dry click sounded as he squeezed trigger a third time, and he shuddered as rapid hofbeats faded and died in the darkness.

Reloading his gun, he went back inside. The cantina was empty except for the swarthy bartender and the sprawled body against the counter.

Martin said, "Where are the Americans?"

The bartender shrugged, and said nothing.

Martin sighed with disgust. It was impossible to tell in what direction Britt had gone. Maybe he would head deeper into Mexico. Or even back across the Border. That seemed the best bet. For Britt was alone now. No longer could he lean on Cash Haymes, and likely he lacked the guts to tackle this strange country by himself. He would feel safer where he knew his way around.

Martin rode back to his camp and went to sleep. Tomorrow he would pick up Britt's trail and stick to it until he had his man.

During the next three weeks Martin Mallet picked up and lost Britt's trail at least five times. On the run, Britt never stopped moving. Twice he stole horses, hoping to hide his trail, but he never hid it completely. The second time was at a stage station along Cooke's Road where Martin missed him by less than an hour.

One thing became evident: slowly but surely, Jim Britt was moving north toward Bilcox or beyond. Toward home country where he would consider himself safe? Martin wondered. Or toward the scene that marked the start of his destruction?

The trail led to Bilcox. Martin was leading his pack-horse along the main street of Bilcox when Marshal Morton hailed him.

"Been a long time," Morton said. "How'd you make out?"

"Jim Britt might be here in town right now."

Morton shook his head. He eyed Martin strangely. "He passed through here this morning. Ragged-looking kid. He—"

"You saw him?"

"The town's not so big that I miss a stranger."

Martin exploded. "Then why didn't you arrest him?"

"Got no warrant for him."

"He was riding a stolen horse!"

Morton shrugged. "Something I didn't know."

"You knew I was looking for him."

"Sure. But that don't mean I got to arrest him. You got a warrant?"

"You know I haven't," Martin said angrily.

Morton nodded. "You got Pinto and I take it you got Cash. Now you got this boy humping and dodging shadows." He paused. "Satisfied yet?"

"No," Martin said coldly, and rode on.

That evening when he approached the lights of Bradley's station he was bone-tired, and his horses were worn out. He wondered how much longer Britt could hold out before he would have to make a stand.

Martin was walking his horses past the low adobe wall and looking across it at the house, when Britt shot him. In the dusk he saw the wild young face rise above the wall, then the gun in a young hand blossomed and roared and in the flashing sound Martin felt the shock of the bullet as it tore his flesh.

THE boy screamed, "Damn you!—damn you!" and fired again. He

missed as Martin slipped from saddle.

Martin did not fall all the way. Gripping the saddle-horn with his right hand he hauled himself erect, at the same time spurring his horse to the wall.

The pain was spreading across his left shoulder. That was all he really knew as he fumbled his gun from leather and scrambled out of saddle. He saw the figure running through the dusk leap aboard a horse, and he fired. Britt raced through the open gate and out of sight along the road. Martin ground his teeth together as he tried to climb on his own horse to give chase. He groaned. Then his legs doubled under him and he pitched forward and lay still.

Bradley came out and helped Martin into the house. It wasn't a bad wound, but the weeks on the trail had worn down his resistance and the shock of being hit, more than the flesh wound itself had flattened him.

Bradley's Mexican wife cleaned the wound and bandaged it. She made a sling for his arm. As Bradley watched Martin studied him. "Do you always turn your back when you see a man's going to be bushwhacked?"

Bradley's eyes hardened. "Don't say that to me! The boy was here and I let him go. I didn't follow him outside. I reckon he saw you coming, and couldn't take it any longer. But I didn't see him laying for you."

"You let him go?"

"He had a gun," the Mexican woman said, jerking her head at Bradley.

Bradley said gruffly, "I was going to hold him here and call the sheriff."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because the kid's damn near dead!" Bradley half shouted. "Because you've put the fear of God in him, chasing him all over tarnation! I'd as soon whip a dog."

"He killed my wife."

"No! It was Cash. The kid told me it was Cash. He just blurted it out without me asking. When they went after the horses your wife came outside with a shotgun. She told 'em to clear out, and Cash laughed at her. Then when she raised the shotgun, he—" Bradley broke off and turned away.

Martin said to the woman, *"Mil gracias, señora."*

He rose and went to the door.

"Where the hell do you think you're going, with that shoulder?" Bradley demanded.

"Where do you think?" Martin turned. "I'm leaving the pack horse here."

He went out and mounted painfully, pulling himself up by the saddle-horn with one hand. Then he reached for the reins and rode out of the yard.

It was midnight by the time he reached Challis, and his head was throbbing. He turned into the livery stable and Brewer, the night hostler, stared at him and shook his head.

"Man, you might be making history, but you sure look like hell," he said.

"Did a young fellow leave his horse here an hour or two ago?"

"Nope," Brewer said.

"Did you see a rider pass?" Martin insisted.

"Yep." Brewer nodded.

Martin climbed down and flexed his legs. Britt was likely too broke to stable a horse, he thought. He might still be in town, sleeping in some alley, but it seemed unlikely. If Britt had any sense left he would have ridden wide of Challis.

He walked down the first side street and turned at the alley and so came up behind Helen's shop, where he knocked.

WAITING, he leaned his hand against the clapboard building, feeling light-headed now. Helen came with a lamp and opened the door. He heard her gasp:

"Martin! Come in here. You look like you could use some help."

In her sitting room, after she had put a fresh bandage around his wound, she said, "You didn't write."

"No."

"All those weeks and you didn't write," she went on. "Did you ever stop and think about your son and your obligations

to him? Did you ever consider—"

"Don't!" Martin said sharply. "I had a job to do. Don't make something else out of it."

"And now that it's done—" she began.

He looked at her. She was a handsome woman his own age, and he had known her longer than he had known Mary. Long ago there had been a time when he had thought seriously of marrying Helen, but then he had met Mary and all other women had moved out of his head. Now something worked inside him.

He squeezed his eyes tight-shut and opened them again. "It's not done," he said.

That shocked her for a moment.

"There's one left," Martin said.

"One!" she repeated fiercely. "One more corpse to throw on Mary's grave."

"Shut up, Helen!"

"It's true! Do you think she would have wanted you to do what you've done? To hunt and kill men like as if they were animals? Now you come back and say there's one more. What's happened to you, Martin?" She added bitterly, "Oh, it's in your face. There's hate and there's fear in it, and in your eyes. You're like—" She put her face in her hands and took a shuddering breath.

Martin rose, feeling cold as a winter sky. "I'm going to the hotel," he said.

She raised her face and he saw that her eyes were wet. "Your son," she said. "You haven't even asked to see your son."

"I'll see him," Martin said, and went out.

The town was asleep, the saloons closed, and there were no horses at the tie-rails. Martin walked past the sheriff's office. Through the window he saw the night man nodding in a chair. He went on to the hotel, got a room; and sat by the window until the first gray light showed in the east. Then he went downstairs to breakfast, and afterwards waited on the veranda until Blount came to relieve his night man.

He went across to the sheriff's office and stepped inside. Blount looked up and said in a matter-of-fact way:

"I figured you'd show up. Been here long?"

"Where is he, Ed?"

"Around town somewhere."

"I thought so. He came in last night to give himself up, didn't he?"

"I wouldn't talk to him," Blount said.

"What do you mean you wouldn't talk to him? He's still wanted for being involved in that stage holdup, isn't he?"

"Sure, but even a law officer can look the other way when he feels the need."

"What're you geting at?"

"You want to kill him, don't you?" Blount said angrily. "Isn't that why you chased him from hell to breakfast and got him so crazy he took a shot at you? All right, you're going to get your chance. He's at the livery stable. He spent the night there. But I don't know anything about this, understand? Now get out!"

Martin looked at the lawman and wet his lips. Then he stepped outside and gazed toward the stable. He hardened his heart and forced his legs to take him in that direction. Murder was one thing; vengeance something else, he told himself. The mother of his son lay buried. . . .

HE SAW Jim Britt step outside the stable. He saw the pale, drawn face. He heard the boy scream:

"Yeah, here I am! You found me and now you can kill me! Go ahead, kill me!"

Less than twenty feet separated them.

Martin went for his gun.

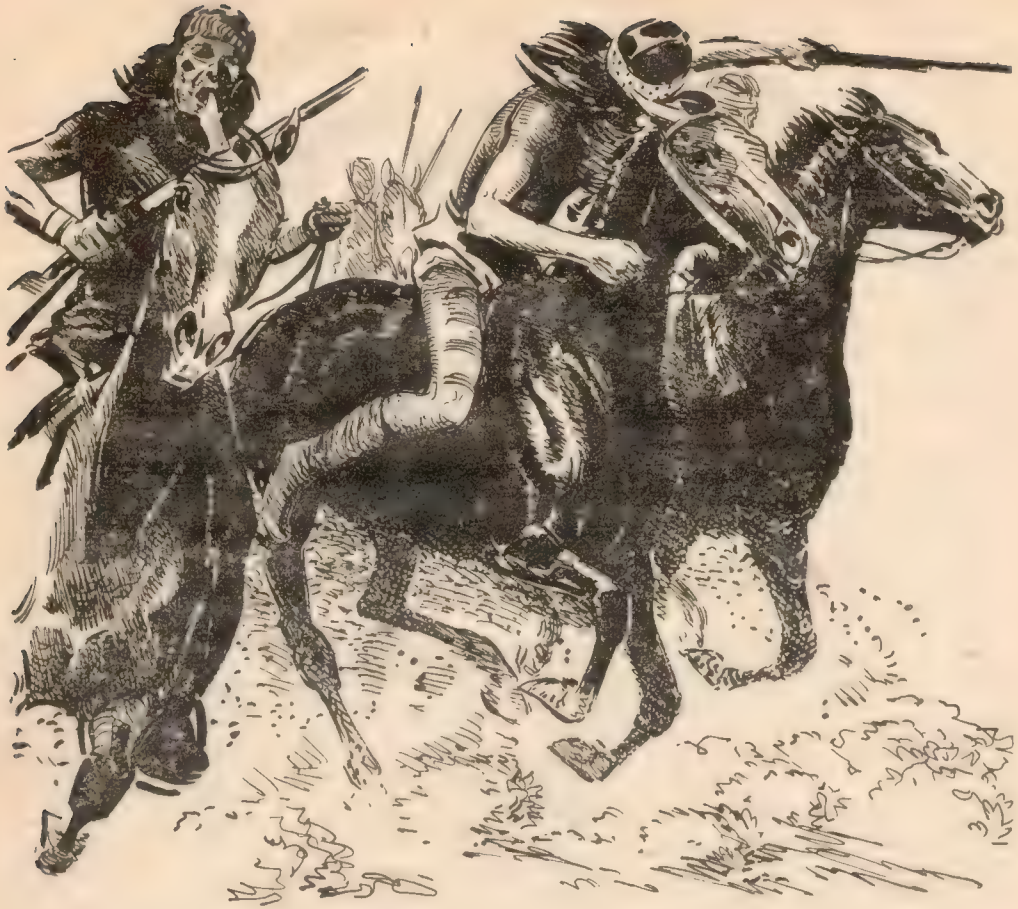
He raised it. The hammer was cocked when he stopped; for Britt hadn't drawn his weapon. He stood with his head thrust forward, his eyes shut.

Something cracked and broke in Martin Mallet. Holstering his gun, he said:

"Get out of here, kid."

A long shudder ran through Jimmy Britt and he began to sob. If there was any guilt attached to him he was paying now, Martin thought, as he turned away.

He thought of Mary and for the first time in weeks felt an odd sense of peace. The door to the future was not closed. He hurried his steps. He needed suddenly to see Helen and his son. • • •



Then, to a man, the Indians charged square into the muzzles of the pioneer's rifles

WITHIN THE BARRICADE

By JAMES D. LEE

The Apaches kept coming, riding over their dead, and the Frenchman hoped the end would not be too cruel for the brave woman beside him

THE lean Frenchman worked the lever action of his carbine and took hasty aim at the Indian flashing on his paint horse. He cursed as the hammer clicked on the empty chamber, then tossed the weapon to the woman cowering behind the overturned Conesotago for her to reload.

Blood was trickling from beneath the bandage which swathed his forehead. He wiped it away, then drew the back of his hand across the gray mustache which drooped over his thin, parched lips. bloodying the sweat which dripped from the tips.

He winced involuntarily as a yelling savage swept close toward the wagon. Ducking and drawing his Colt in one motion he squeezed off a hurried shot which caught the screaming Apache squarely in the chest and sent him tumbling from his pony, dead before his body hit the dust under the frightened pony's feet.

A fire arrow zipped past him, inches from his face, and buried itself in the canvas of his wagon which was on the outside of the circle. There would be no way of fighting that fire while the Indians still were circling, he realized, as he reached for the carbine the wide-eyed woman offered him wordlessly.

He raised it and squeezed off another shot, nicking a horse badly in the chest. It reared in fright. He was looking for another target when he felt the soft hands of the woman fumbling at his waist, pulling .45 cartridges from his belt to reload the pistol he had dropped. He hazarded a shot at a distant Indian and missed, then looked down tenderly at the frightened woman. He took a deep breath and directed his attention to the whole band of Indians now whooping past the sector he was assigned to cover. From off one side he heard the crackle of flames, and smelled burning canvas.

"Injuns getting a little more cautious," muttered a voice at the Frenchman's elbow. He shot a glance at the cavalry corporal who spoke. Dirty and unshaven, his blue shirt was hanging in shreds. Blood oozed from dozens of small cuts and abrasions, seemingly unnoticed by the horse soldier. "Cover me," he said quickly. "I'll see what I can do about that fire."

BEFORE the Frenchman could reply the soldier was over the barricade, ripping the blazing canvas from the prairie schooner. Two young bucks detached themselves from the circling savages and swung inward toward the exposed soldier, screaming, and brandishing their primitive weapons.

The Frenchman raised his carbine once more, menacingly now, and expertly put a shot through the head of the leading Indian. The red man's war ax flew high in the air as he somersaulted from his pony and plunged face-first into the dust. A second shot missed the other Indian when the paint pony he rode shied away from the other Apache's now riderless steed.

Another shot must have made a solid hit on the bronze form leaping in front of the Frenchman's rifle, but still the Apache charged, his lance held low. The Frenchman levered in another round which he discharged at almost point-blank range.

The disheveled cavalryman who had continued to fight the flaming tarpaulin when the Indians charged him, received the point of the lance between his shoulder-blades before he was aware of the nearness of danger. He whirled as he was dying, to face a dying Indian who was sliding from his pony. Together they fell into the burning canvas which the corporal had succeeded in freeing from the wagon.

Slowly the Frenchman lowered the rifle to the woman who now was kneeling at his feet, and accepted the Colt from her, only vaguely aware of her soft sobs.

The circling Indians who had pulled a hundred yards away from the wagons now widened the distance still more, until gradually they melted into the surrounding foothills. The Frenchman pushed back his sombrero and leaned his forehead on a packing case in front of him, futilely trying to control the shudder which passed through his body.

Men had backed away from their positions within the barricade and were talking to each other in low tones. Canteens were being quietly passed back and forth.

In the center of the ring a cavalry officer was passing out ammunition, rationing it carefully. The Frenchman staggered to-

ward him.

Someone handed him a canteen as he crossed the arena. He paused to accept it and to drink deeply.

"How is it over there on your side, Henot?" someone asked uselessly.

"Cum ci, cum ca," the Frenchman replied tonelessly, handing back the canteen.

Henot accepted the handful of cartridges offered him and turned to go back to his post. The woman still crouched where he had left her, and his face softened slightly as he reached again for the canteen.

She didn't look up as he approached. She had stopped crying, but her streaked face told of the tears she had shed.

"Bon jour," Henot greeted her softly, pushing the canteen into her hand.

She looked up, her face expressionless save for the wide, moist eyes. She took the canteen from his non-too-steady hand and held it in both of hers while she drank long and deep, before she returned it to him.

Henot glanced across the plain to the now quiet foothills, then sank down beside the woman.

"Please, Madame, no more tears. It is useless." His voice was soothingly warm and gentle.

"I— I suppose you're right," she murmured, turning to face him. "How— many are dead?"

"Too many, far too many," he choked, feeling a knot grow in his throat as he looked into her deep, sorrowful eyes. His gaze wandered to the other end of the overturned wagon, to the huddled form of a once-hardy pioneer who had been among the first to fall. Near him sprawled the lifeless form of a boy, a .22 rifle still clutched in his young fingers.

The woman followed his eyes, turning back to him. "My husband," she muttered, with a catch in her voice.

"And my son," he said flatly. "My very young son."

The fear and sadness in her eyes was softened by sympathy. "I—I'm sorry. I guess I was feeling sorry only for myself."

"We all were, I am sure. But those savages will be back, and we must think of the living."

HE HANDED her the cartridges, which she took and lay in her lap. Henot slowly, deliberately, picked up his reloaded carbine and cradled it in the crook of his left arm. Blood again began to trickle onto his eyebrows, and his head throbbed as if it would split.

"Please," the woman was saying, "please save a bullet for me." The words came easily, and fell on Henot's ears without his fully realizing the impact of their meaning.

Screaming Apaches charged out of the hills at breakneck speed, straight toward the wagons and the uplifted weapons of the pioneers. Rifles exploded as one continual rumble, while the Indians swerved and again began to circle the wagon train, gradually diminishing their distance from it.

Every man in the circle pumped shell after shell into his weapon and fired as rapidly as possible at the savages. But it was to no avail other than merely to forestall a direct assault. The Indians kept out of effective range, and few fell to the barrage.

Henot's pistol was totally useless at long range, so he fretted nervously as the woman reloaded his carbine, itself of little good. She had refilled it for the third time and he was bringing it to bear on the swirling mass of bronze bodies when again the Indians widened their circle and melted into the hills.

Slowly the bewildered frontiersman stopped firing as they came to realization of the situation. The savages were holding up their final, all-out charge until the white man had foolishly wasted their firepower.

"They've gone?" the woman was asking with an unnatural high pitch in her voice.

"Only for a moment," the Frenchman replied ruefully, counting the cartridges in the woman's lap. Only once more could she reload the carbine, after he had dis-

charged the magazine now full. "They've made fools of us." He turned half away from the barricade and glanced into the woman's troubled face.

"And what were you thinking when they attacked?" she asked.

"Only to kill," he replied slowly. "To kill as many of them as possible and to die avenged. And you?"

"Just idle thoughts, none like those you had. I thought about the farm we would have had in California. How serene life would have been, if only it hadn't been for this day." Her voice broke in a sob.

A cavalry lieutenant, tattered and nervous, was making the circle of the camp, talking to the defenders of every position. He approached the Frenchman, impressive despite the condition of his once immaculate uniform. His stiff back and firm jaw were belied by the distraught look in his eye and his disheveled, bloody clothing. "We've got one last chance to beat them," he was saying rapidly, "and every man must do his part."

HE GLANCED at the rifle and the small pile of cartridges. "Get yourself another carbine—from one of the casualties—and load it. Have every round ready to fire. This your wagon?" He nodded to the overturned Conestoga.

Henot tilted his head to indicate that it was.

"Good. If you haven't any coal oil, borrow some from one of these other wagons. Soak this wagon with it, then hold your position until the redskins come back. Don't fire until they get close, and then only when you have a sure target. When they make their charge one of my men will set a match to this whole side of wagons and make an impenetrable, though temporary, barrier of flames. You men along this side dash over to the other side, where they'll have to come if they want to get into the circle. We'll narrow our defensive perimeter, and make them come to us if they want to finish this thing. It's our only chance, and still a slim one."

"Burn my wagon?" Henot asked.

[Turn page]

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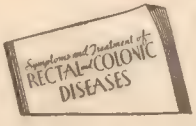

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"If you don't, you'll never need another wagon," the officer replied in a tone of understanding firmness.

Henot shrugged and went off in search of coal oil.

When he returned the woman was on her feet with another loaded carbine. She watched his empty stare as he spilled the liquid over the bed of his wagon, and stepped close to him to say softly, "If your wagon must be burned, and we get out of here, there's mine on the other side of the circle. I'll have no need for it."

"Merci," he replied tonelessly, looking not in the direction of her pointing finger but directly into her almost placid face. *"Merci."*

It seemed an eternity that they waited, with everything in readiness for their one chance to repulse the raiders. Then a half-naked form appeared on one of the hills, lance held high over his head. He let out a long hideous scream and kneed his horse into motion. Behind him appeared the rest of the savages, roaring their song of death and brandishing their murderous weapons.

Henot unbuckled his gun-belt and handed it to the woman. "I'll use the carbines," he said simply, and she took the Colt with a grim smile.

The Apaches thundered down on the circle, then veered off and whirled around again in a gentle spiral, gradually closing the distance. Near by a confident marksman let fly a shot, and an Indian plumeted from his mount. Another fired and missed. And yet another.

"Fools," the Frenchman muttered under his breath, through clenched teeth.

He sighted down the barrel of his own carbine and his grip tightened. The distance still would not allow for any accuracy, but the temptation was great.

Closer the savages circled, and the sporadic firing became more constant, until it was almost a roar in Henot's ears. Arrows began flying sent by the attackers at ineffective range.

And then, to a man, the Indians broke formation and charged directly into the blazing muzzles of the pioneers' weapons. The carbine in the Frenchman's hand jumped into action, spitting death into the face of the nearest Apache. From somewhere a soldier came with a torch, to set his officer's plan into action. The charging Apaches were only a few yards from the barricade, and thundering down on it relentlessly.

The Frenchman heard the Colt in the hand of the woman now standing at his side bark and he saw an Indian reel from his pinto with the back of his skull shot away. And then the hammer of his carbine fell on an empty chamber.

An Indian who had reached the barricade, and had leaped from his horse to stand on the very boxes from which Henot and the woman was firing. The muzzle of her Colt came up, to be discharged into the grinning face of the red man. Henot saw the Indian cough a stream of blood as he collapsed into the circle.

And there in the dirt, some ten feet from the oil-drenched wagons, lay the soldier with the smoldering torch clutched firmly in his hand and an Apache arrow buried in his chest.

Henot dropped his empty carbine and raced to the postrate form, wrested the torch from his clenched fist, and tossed it at the overturned wagon.

ANOTHER Indian leaped into the circle just as the whole arc of wagons flamed up. The woman had turned her back and was picking up the other carbine. Henot watched helplessly as the savage grinned and brought his battle ax high over his head. But suddenly the Indian writhed in pain and arched his back, and Henot saw the blotch of crimson high up on his ribs, where someone had planted a bullet.

The Frenchman grabbed the carbine from the woman and rushed to the other side of the circle, where the red men now were streaming over the barricade. At a dead run he emptied the carbine into the solid line of savages on the packing cases of the barricade. And still they came.

He was in the midst of it now, and

swinging the empty carbine by the hot muzzle. A red arm flashed by, and he felt the whistle of an ax. He whipped his rifle butt flatly across the sharp face of the Indian who wielded it, then rammed it hard into his chin, breaking his neck.

Behind the combatants roared the wall of flame, pouring out billows of smoke.

A brilliant whiteness flashed across Henot's vision, and he stood frozen for a long moment before he felt the pain throbbing in his already badly injured skull. Through bleary eyes the Frenchman saw the savage rear back to bring his ax down again, and he made a desperate, bull-headed charge, burying his tortured head in the hard ribs of the savage, knocking him from his feet. Suddenly he realized that his carbine was gone, that he was fighting barehanded. He leaped on the winded Indian, wrested his ax from his hand and brought it down with several short strokes into an Apache face.

Another Indian was on his back, wrestling him for the ax. Henot flattened suddenly, sending the Indian sprawling over his head. Then the Frenchman was up and on him, crushing his skull with blows.

Henot leaped to his feet and whirled around, holding the ax close to his body. And suddenly his body went limp.

A few soldiers and pioneers stood, staggered around, or kneeled in the smoke and dust of the circle, and here and there an Indian moaned as he neared death. And the realization was slow in coming to Henot. The battle had been won

He stood there half unconscious for a long time, thanking God for deliverance. And then he stiffened and looked around, bewildered and missing someone.

She stood near, still clutching the .45 in a lifeless hand that drooped at her side. Her face was black from the smoke.

Henot stepped uncertainly toward her, and she stood silently watching him. And the next moment she flung herself at him.

"It's all over, all done, and we have won!" he was muttering, as she buried her face on his shoulder and sobbed.

"And now," he said, "we go west?"

"Yes," she murmured. "Yes, yes." • • •

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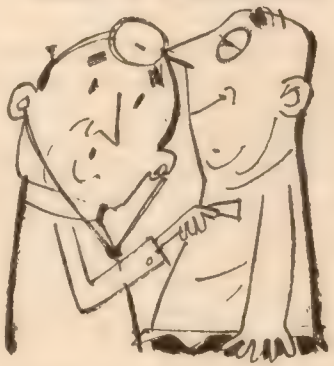

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Lawman's Widow

By FERRIS MELVIN WEDDLE

Molly alone could stop them from lynching the man who had killed her husband . . . but she wanted to lynch him, too!

SHE had ceased trying to shut out the sound of the sporadic fury of the lynch mob. Eventually they would storm the jail and hang Walt Freel, she knew, and the thought gave her grim comfort.

It was easier now that the women of the town, with their empty words, had left her alone. How could they possibly understand what Mike's death meant, what all the terrible years of being a lawman's wife had meant? But she, Molly Balcome, knew that a mixture of fear, pride and resentment well, though more often she had known just gnawing fear.

Perhaps, Molly thought, she should have been prepared for this as one of the "comforting" women had intimated. Yet, no matter how hard anyone tried to be prepared for a visit from the specter of untimely death that did not help when it actually showed up. After twenty years of strain, you became gloriously hopeful when there was only one year left before your man would retire. You began to think perhaps you would not be a lawman's widow, after all.

Lawman's widow! Now that fear had become reality, and now Molly Balcome had but one hope—that the mob would hang the sallow-faced kid who had done

it. And she knew that Mike would be ashamed of her if it were possible for him to know.

Early that morning the paymaster for the Vinson Mines had been shot and robbed. He had died shortly after reporting the crime to Mike, gasping out Walt Freel's name. Mike had been sure the paymaster was mistaken. Sure, he'd known Walt was a tough kid, but he wouldn't commit a crime like this, Mike had insisted. Molly, with a soaring sense of impending tragedy, had begged Mike to take two deputies with him when he had gone after Walt.

"Sure, honey," Mike had said, "if it will make you feel better. But I can handle Walt." He'd looked at her soberly. "Molly, you've got to stop being so edgy. Every little job I do—"

"I know, Mike, I know!" she had protested almost hysterically. "But I can't seem to help it. Just a few more months, then you retire, and we can live like normal human beings." She'd caught his hand. "Mike, nothing *can* happen now, can it?"

It had happened. Walt Freel *had* been the robber-killer. He had been preparing to leave the ranch when Mike and his two deputies had ridden up, and he'd been unaware that he had been recognized by the paymaster, since he'd worn a mask.

WALT had barricaded himself in the ranch house, exchanging fire with the law officers for an hour, ignoring Mike's pleas to give himself up. At last, he'd agreed to surrender if Mike would come in for him alone.

"I tried to stop Mike," Deputy Sheriff Ken Sawlin had reported to Molly later. "He wouldn't listen—just seemed angry and kind of sad. Kept muttering about how people never had given Walt a chance. Mike said he hadn't, either, even though he had tried to get Walt's pop a light sentence for that cattle rustling deal that had left Walt on his own."

Then, shortly after Mike entered the

[Turn page]

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house—two shots. Walt Freel had walked out, kill-lust still in his over-bright eyes. He handed his still-warm revolver to Ken Sawlin.

"There's a present in there for all of Call County," he'd said. "You got plenty of reason to hang me now." Then, Walt Freel had broken down, sobbing.

And so had come the end for a man who had done more than any other to bring law and order to Call County. The man who had often gone against public opinion in carrying out his duties, trying to help those who stepped outside the law. He had sent his son, Glen, to law school, for he believed the West needed men schooled in law with hearts imbued with a sense of justice.

By mid-afternoon it appeared that all of Call County was in town. Men gathered in knots, their talk grim. Ugliness spread from group to group, and the groups united, held together by a dull muttering of voices in the still air.

Molly paced the floor, often going to the window to look out at the mob. A slow contempt crept into her consciousness as she saw the men going in and out of the bars. Mike had never needed courage from a bottle, not even when he had faced a mob eight years before, making the mob back down. That had been the last lynching attempt in Call County.

Until now!

This was different. Or was it? She watched a lone man moving toward the house, a piece of paper in his hand—Ken Sawlin. And he was frowning worriedly.

The telegram was from Glen. He would be home as soon as possible. That could not be for at least two days and nights. Molly wondered—could she stand it alone that long?

"Molly," Ken said hesitantly, "the mob's getting bad. Mike never let no mob take over."

"Is there any question of that rotten kid's guilt?" she asked harshly. "Let them hang him, Ken. Don't get yourself hurt protecting that scum like that."

"That don't sound like you, Molly," Ken whispered. "It's my duty to protect Freel—even if I'd like to join the mob. He's got to have a fair trial—"

"You're as warped as Mike was about due process of law!" she flared, flushing. "I'm sorry, Ken, but I can't do what I know you have in mind. If I go out there, I'll lead that mob."

Ken's eyes were unbelieving. "It's not for me, or for Freel, Molly. It's for Mike. If that boy is lynched, it will make a lie of all Mike worked for all his life."

The words were cut off by a sixgun blast. Ken ran swiftly toward the jail. Watching him, Molly thought, Mike would be proud of him. Would he be proud of his widow?

She pushed the thought aside, going to Mike's study, looking at the litter of papers with loving eyes. If only she could cry! But tears had not come yet.

Her hands touched the worn back of his chair. She prayed, Help me, Mike! I don't want this hatred and bitterness. I want to feel sorry for Walt Freel. He's the one who will suffer most, somehow.

An unfinished letter to Glen was on the desk, and she read it, her hands clenching the chairback. The last part held her. Mike had written:

> This western country is still raw and crude, and it needs men with ideals, my son. You will never know how proud I am that you will one day fight for justice and—

Molly choked down an incoherent cry of pain, pressing her forehead against the chair. If only she could blank out her thoughts!

That was impossible, and one kept hammering at her, like a cry from Mike. You'll have to stop the mob, Molly! *You'll have to stop the mob!*

The scared eyes of Walt Freel arose before her. How was he feeling now? Why had he killed Mike in cold blood—and then cried? What terrible things had happened to turn him into a murderous beast? Could it as well have happened to Glen? "It couldn't!" she assured her-

self aloud. "Walt Freel has bad blood."

Unmistakably, an echo from the past, came Mike's snort of derision. And again she heard Ken saying, "It's not for me, or Freel, Molly. It's for Mike."

For Mike. Abruptly, tears came, and she was calm as she grabbed a jacket. They'd listen to the lawman's widow. They'd understand that this was her last chance to do anything for Mike Balcome, and their last chance, too.

She half-ran toward the gathering of men on the street. • • •

KILLER BEWARE

(Concluded from Page 87)

to the killing of the former sheriff, Kennedy knew about that, too. It had been done by one of the other wideloops, at Cassiter's order, and the killer had skipped the country immediately.

That might or might not be true. It didn't seem to matter much, since Cassiter was in jail, putting on a show of bravado when people looked in through the window of his cell. Cassiter's trail would be held next month, and its outcome was a certainty. A hell of a thing for a man to be thinking about at his own wedding, Mark told himself sternly.

The brief ceremony came to an end, and he got the ring onto Allie's finger and kissed her. Chet was prompt about claiming his privilege of kissing her too. There was a lot of excited chatter, then Chet was shaking Mark's hand and saying, "Can't think of a man I'd rather see get her, since I couldn't be the one."

Then Allie and Mark were out on the quiet street, walking along together. She squeezed his arm affectionately, then she noticed the paper-wrapped package he was carrying under the other arm.

"What is that, Mark?" she asked.

"Feels like some kind of a dish. It's a wedding present for us, Mrs. Dorban. From an old horse-thief. I hope you won't mind having it around."

"Ben?" Her soft, confiding laughter quickened Mark's heart. "Certainly I'll not mind. I'm a real Western woman now!" • • •

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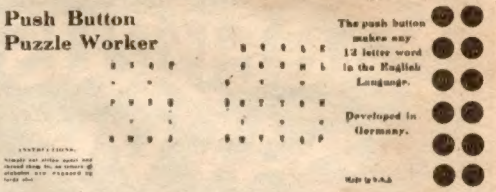

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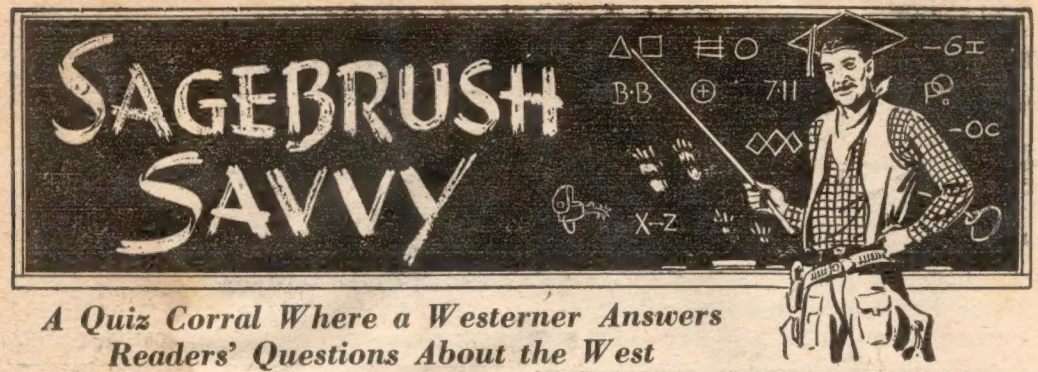

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Who was the first Texas Ranger, and when was the organization founded? (2) Were there ever such persons as Jim Hatfield, Captain Roarin' Bill McDowell and Jack Hays? (3) Where could I obtain some non-fiction books about the history of the Texas Rangers?—Margaret H. (La.).

A.—(1) The ordinance providing for the first organized corps of Texas Rangers was adopted by the Permanent Council of Texas on Nov. 24, 1835, the year before the Texas Republic won its independence from Mexico. It is impossible to say exactly who was the first Texas Ranger, but R. M. Williamson commanded this first corps, with Isaac W. Burton, Wm. H. Arrington and John J. Tumlinson as captains. (2) Although "Hatfield" and "McDowell" were not uncommon names in early Texas, I believe the Jim Hatfield and "Roarin' Bill" McDowell to whom you refer are purely fictional characters so well drawn that they seem like real people. (A Captain Bill *McDonald* was one of the bravest and toughest of Texas Rangers.) John C. Hays, often called Jack Hays, was a noted Captain and Colonel in the Texas Rangers from about 1844 on. (3) The most complete authentic history of the Rangers that I know of is "The Texas Rangers", by Walter Prescott Webb, published by Houghton-Mifflin Co. about 1935 and probably obtainable in your local public library. In it you will also find listed many other non-fiction books about Texas Rangers. "Triggernometry," by Gene Cunningham, features several Texas Rangers in a mighty interesting account.

Q.—Were the Sharps rifles used on the Western frontier ever made in any other caliber besides .50?—W.D.S. (S.D.).

A.—Yes, right there in your own territory some buffalo hunters used .40-105, .45-70, .45-90, .45-120, and .44-77 Sharps rifles, as well as the .50-95, often called "The Big Fifty" or "The Texas Fifty."

Q.—Was uranium ever mined in the mining camps of the Old West?—Al G. (Ga.).

A.—Uranium ore was sometimes dug out along with the ores of other metals, but where separable, went to the dump as valueless. In later years, before its use for nuclear fission was discovered, some uranium compounds appearing in conjunction with vanadium ores were used in coloring ceramic pottery.

Q.—Has the National Cowboy Hall of Fame that I've been reading about been opened yet?—O.R.L. (N.Y.).

A.—Not built yet. The site selected is just outside of Oklahoma City at the junction of U. S. Hwys. 66 and 77. Of the one million dollars for the building, Oklahoma has pledged to raise $750,000, the remaining $250,000 to be raised by 16 other Western states. The present board of directors consists of Chairman C. A. Reynolds of Kansas City, three vice chairmen: Albert Mitchell of New Mexico, Fred Dressler of Nevada, A.M.G. (Swede) Swenson of Texas; secretary Fred Porter Jr. of Arizona, and members Ray Schnell of North Dakota and J. Evetts Haley of Texas. The Board hopes to begin building within the next year.

Q.—Was there some kind of chuck that old-time cowboys called "gun-waddin' "?—J.W.G. (W. Va.).

A.—Yep, light bread, as contrasted with biscuits.

S. Omar Barker

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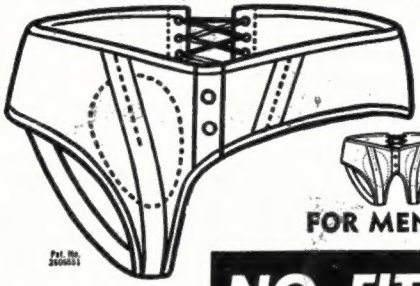

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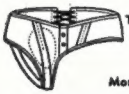

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